



ABDUCTION CHRONICLES

# GENESIS

BOOK 1

PETER JOHN

# **ABDUCTION CHRONICLES: GENESIS**

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*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. (Confucius)*

# PROLOGUE

## A RUDE AWAKENING

Scars are symbols of strife, written in blood and pain. They can be found anywhere on a person. Sometimes jagged, bulbous and heart-wrenching upon the eye. Other times they slide right by, disguised by healing, hair, tattoos or clothing. Sometimes they are even beautiful, but all are catalysts of change.

The ones I had, the most severe that is, lasted for decades in my mind, whereas some healed in a month. The ability to heal is a coverup, because scars mark us, sometimes skin deep, sometimes so deeply that even the barest mention of their presence can set your mood for days. It is not their appearance that marks a scar's severity, it is their lingering effect on one's psyche.

I contemplated the half dollar sized scar on my belly; The one that brought with it a resurgence of memories from a life of peaceful retirement to where I would live several lifetimes all over again. It was where it all began though, and my thoughts drifted far, far back. I realized I had to tell someone. Something had to remain after I was gone, if that was at all possible. My scars were a pathway to those memories. Someone had to know what we were fighting for.

# CHAPTER 1

## ABDUCTION CHRONICLES: GENESIS



*“WHEN THE BRIGHT LIGHTS CAME FOR ME, I WAS  
UNPREPARED”*

I was snatched from sleep as an impossible hand, was it a hand? Whatever it was, it clamped like a vice around my face and muffled my shouts. Dazed from sleep, lost in a dream, only to wake into a nightmare. I struggled and fought, panicking wildly.

“How had they gotten through my defenses?” I thought to myself. “Who are these men?”

The flashing lights caused me to squint. A shadow materialized into some kind of freak attached to the arm. I saw more shadows now, more grasping limbs. My bedsheets had been ripped off and they were pinning me down. Something had each one of my limbs and struggle as I might, they would not release me. There were no weak points, no let-up of their power over me. They had me dead to rights and the more I struggled, the tighter they clamped.

My pulse quickened as realization dawned. No, these were not men. They were something else entirely. My struggles and attempts to shout intensified. “God no! Please! This isn’t happening! Are they... no it cannot be!” My thoughts cascaded into madness and with another supreme effort I tried to free myself again, only to pause as a kind of humming filled the air, a vibration that caused me to remember my training.

“Stop! evaluate, then act. Whatever you do, don’t panic.” Fine words to live by, fine words I had taught many a soldier. It seemed like they would

be fine words to die by as well. My consciousness began to fade and my last thoughts were of spidery bipedal bodies with large ovoid heads, tear shaped compound eyes and thin purple lips. There was no humanity in those faces.

My name is Colonel Petros Arkansas (ret.) and I was abducted in the Year 2025. It was a clean abduction as far as abductions go. No alarms, no strange sounds, only the lights and humming, which I later learned was their form of communication. They had me before I even knew they were there. Perhaps in my youth I would have had a chance, but hobbled by retirement, a lack of mental preparedness and a few glasses of scotch the night before left me completely at their mercy.

I awoke in a stark washed-out room. Nothing in my field of view besides the walls and ceiling. Light seemed to emanate from the very walls themselves. I could feel I was naked as chill vapors surrounded me. I was on a type of gurney, with restraints, but besides those sensations I could not move at all. I could tell my muscles to bunch, to struggle, but the message wasn't getting through. A head loomed into my view and it was a good thing I was immobile because I really wanted to back the fuck away from it. It was very definitely alien. The tear-shaped compound eyes reflected my fear strained face in all its facets and I gulped audibly.

Then I heard the voice. It was a mechanical voice. something a computer would intone. "Petros Arkansas" it stated and I flinched as if struck. How did it know my name? How did it know English? How did it talk without moving its lips?

The creature moved slightly as if getting comfortable. A dentist ready to drill a cavity riddled tooth. I panicked and felt urine trickle around my scrotum. I hated dentists. It was completely humiliating. I was one of the finest soldiers in the world, trained to withstand worse torments than someone saying my name. But that was just it. This wasn't someone. This was an it. No amount of training could prepare anyone for this. I began to hyperventilate. My heart throbbing faster and faster as adrenaline flooded my senses.

Fear I could deal with, I had spent decades making fear work for me, with me, and through me. I could channel it into targeted aggression and deadly consequences. However, this was so far off the radar that I had no response, no coping mechanism.

I gurgled a response. The sound loud in the quiet humming room. It was the best I could do as my tongue refused to obey me.

“Don’t use your voice, use your mind.” The disembodied voice echoed within my head.

I strained and said “FUuurgggh lluu!” as loudly as I could. My defiance barriers were up. I needed a win.

The electric shock that ratcheted through my body was completely unexpected. It ripped through me and I felt every single nerve come alive at once. My body arched, my breath wheezed and my restraints strained. The shock put tasers to shame and I could smell my own excrement.

Panting with relief as it subsided I heard the voice again.

“Try again Petros, but use your mind.”

Defiance is in the heart of every soldier. It allows us to stand when others fall. It gives us purpose to exist. I screamed as loudly as I could through my treacherous unresponsive lips “Fuuurgggh eewww!”

The shock this time, wasn’t so bad. Perhaps I was becoming conditioned. Perhaps it just felt less intense because my nerves were still recovering from the previous shock. Whatever the reason, I mercifully blacked out.

A while later I awoke, cracking my eyes to see if I was alone, but it seemed only a short time had passed and the creature was still there. I tried to play possum, but then that voice reverberated inside my head.

“Do we really need to go down the route of unpleasantness again?” it said still looming large in my vision. Its weird purple lips never moved. This creature was really using telepathy to talk to me.

“I am known as Grant by your kind and yes I am using a form of nerve impulse telepathy to communicate with you. We find shock therapy brings humans to a receptive frame of mind quickly. I trust you won’t need another example?”

The voice seemed almost eager. Challenging. I quickly shook my head. It seemed to relax.

“Good, now to forestall unnecessary questions let me say this. I am an Alien, yes. Humans call us Absinthe and we have selected you.”

It paused to let that sink in, then continued, “In order that we can communicate effectively we have devised this form of communication to expedite matters. Where we come from and how we got here are not important, although to you they may seem the most important questions to ask. To alleviate that query let me say we come from a distant part of the Universe and a place you humans are unlikely to discover anytime soon. How we got here is equally unimportant. The fact is, we are here, and have been observing humanity for a long time. Many hundreds of years in fact. We remain undetected and travel about without the slightest worry that we will be discovered. Your technology has a long way to go.”

“So now let me reiterate, it matters not. The reason we have you here is for testing. You will either pass or fail. It is my job to ensure you have the best chance to pass. You have been selected based on a great deal of profiling. Nod if you are following me so far?”

I nodded vigorously.

“Good, now I would ask you to respond to me with your mind. Think your thoughts at me.”

I complied and blurted “What are you doing to me?” It was all I could get out before white noise and static hissed through my thoughts. I flinched and then tried again. “I am hungry, do you have any food?”

It was a deflection and standard operating procedure for any captive trained as I was. Gain as much nutrition as possible as soon as possible. You never know when you will get the chance to escape and besides I was quite hungry, I must have been here for quite some time already.

The response was unexpected. Not only did my stomach grumble to support the request, but Grant turned his head to the side and moved from my field of view. Then I heard a metallic noise, something clicked and a robotic arm moved into view. It hovered as if to get its bearings then moved again. It stopped roughly over my sternum. I began to get a bad feeling. The bad feeling was compounded as a large needle, easily the dimensions of a half dollar coin, began to lower, then adjust, and then lower some more. It was aiming for my stomach region and I couldn’t do a thing about it.

I couldn’t scream or flinch or do anything much, but internally I was screaming and when it pierced my flesh I tensed. It was excruciating. *What the hell! All I wanted was some food, not stomach surgery!*

As the pain subsided, I felt a gentle tugging on the needle that had inserted itself, and a feeling of satiation washed over me and through me. It



felt wonderful. I closed my eyes in bliss and noticed a light shining through my lids. It went from amber to green. I wanted to say more, to discuss more with my captor, but the supply of sustenance drove me into the dark halls of blissful sleep.

It was a short-lived reprieve. I opened my eyes a short while later to find Grants' head hovering above me again. The insect eyes were impossible to gauge, so I just assumed I was the focus of his attention. "You are content?" he asked inside my mind. It really was weird knowing he was speaking to me via telepathy. I kept looking at his alien grey mottled face. The reflective sheen on his skin giving me the impression he was slimy to the touch. The two slits where his nose should be flared from time to time, so I assumed they had the same function as a nose. I began to gather phlegm in my mouth, wondering if I could spit onto him. Almost choking, I realized I didn't have the muscle control and relaxed the effort. At least mentally I was spitting at him. That would have to do for now. He seemed to notice that I relaxed slightly and his voice began anew in my head.

"Good Petros. Acceptance is part of the process. The sooner you accept your predicament, the sooner we can get to your training." I complied of course, I had no other choice.

Internally I planted a seed deep down that a chance would come to free myself and then I would get even. I knew this was how all slavery and subjugation starts. At first, one accepts the scraps, then becomes thankful for them, and then accepts more until eventually you become so used to the new environment that everything seems normal. I swore to myself right then that I would never let that happen. That no matter how satisfied I was with my new overlords treatment, I would never ever stop looking for a way to be free. These thoughts and more were swirling in my head as I closed my eyes and sought refuge in sleep.



# CHAPTER 2

## BEETLE MANIA

A hot breeze ruffled my hair as the chill of the room receded and a new reality woke my senses. A dry, clean scent filled my nostrils and as I opened my eyes I was immediately blinded by the stark brightness of daylight. No longer in my whitewashed room, I stumbled as I tried to grasp where I was, how I got here and what was happening to me.

As far as I could see, huge sand dunes coated the landscape, receding into the distance. The stark sky above was clear blue without a cloud in the sky. It gave me the impression I could see forever. I didn't understand the how yet, but either I had been rejected by the aliens or this was part of the test.

As I rotated, marveling at the expanse and sense of freedom I felt, I began to realize how fragile I was too. This was a harsh landscape, and all I was wearing was a white cotton loincloth. My bare feet began to feel uncomfortable on the hot sand, but I found that if I buried them just below the surface, it was much cooler. Towards one side and about a kilometer away appeared to be a rocky expanse with several windswept boulders littered around. I decided if there was any shade to be had, that was the most likely place to find it. I also noticed to my astonishment that I had a staff in my hand with a hardened nub at the end. It fitted comfortably in my hand.

The sand was getting hot, even with my feet buried, so making for the rocks I started to walk. Each footstep careful and controlled. I couldn't remember the last time I was on a beach, but it was a good few years ago and before that my times in deserts had always been in full military gear.

As I found my stride, I began to relax. It was a nice day out and why I was here was not clear yet. While I couldn't do anything about that, I knew that survival was key. You can't do much when you dehydrate in a place like this, which is the same as being dead, only longer.

Cresting a dune, I noticed a rasping sound. It seemed to vibrate through my feet and I looked around puzzled. No, it wasn't from the breeze, which

caused the sand to shift and rasp. It was a more pronounced sound. I moved down the other side of the dune and heard the sound again. This time more clearly.

If I was a betting man, I would have to say that it sounded like something was moving in response to my movements. Was I causing it? No, my feet hardly made a dent in the dunes. But there it was again. Unmistakable. I crested the next dune and tried to see if I could notice anything.

There! Roughly a hundred meters away, movement. The sand was distorting. It appeared to be something burrowing just below the sand, leaving a clear wake that snaked back into the distance. It intersected with my windswept footprints and now seemed to be following them. I couldn't really make it out clearly except that the displaced sand caused the sound that was very definitely getting louder.

*Shit! I knew this was too good to be true.* I admonished myself as I headed for the rocks quickly. *What the hell was that thing?* It looked like a worm or creature was stalking me.

I had kept myself relatively fit even in my retirement, but it wasn't everyday that you trained running on sand and it quickly became apparent that I didn't have the stamina for a full out sprint. Whatever it was that had my scent was gaining and I was definitely not going to get to the rocks before it caught up to me.

Slowing a little, I bided my time. I didn't want to be drained of energy when whatever it was decided to attack. I had to be ready.

The creature was now only twenty meters back and gaining with each stride I took, so I turned around and kept backing away. Visions of huge worms from Frank Herbert's 'Dune' kept my adrenaline spiked and senses screaming with readiness. I even hoisted my staff in the chop wood position.

When it was roughly five meters from me, it burst like a zit from the sand and all my imaginings could not have prepared me for the giant sized beetle flying towards me. It had huge scything mandibles that spread wide as it bore down on me.

It was easily one meter long, black head, thorax and abdomen, and two twitching antennae waving generally in my direction. The splayed mouth parts an additional half meter wide to snap closed at the first opportunity.

The scuttling legs blurred as they propelled the bug creature forwards, sand spewing all around. It closed on me with incredible speed and took me completely by surprise. Had I not braced myself it would have severed my body cleanly in two.

I barely had time to swing the staff down. But swing the staff I did, incorporating many years of martial arts training into that single focused blow. The hardened nub at the end of the staff smashed down and somehow managed to hit the spot between the creatures head and thorax. The bug face-planted and then somersaulted. The weight of its body plummeted into me and I spun away absorbing the blow and using it to turn me around, ready for the next attack. As I completed my turn, I realized I had stunned it and it was arching its back. The six legs curling to cover its underside and it hissed out a long and thoroughly disturbing hiss that seemed to echo out into the distance.

I stood, staff ready for the next attack, my knees and legs shaking from exertion and fear. *This is not a creature from Earth* I thought to myself as realization dawned on just how isolated and alone I was.

The creature seemed to die with its long last wheeze and after prodding it with the staff to be sure, I carefully made my way to the top of the next dune and looked around. The rocks were a lot closer, but to my dismay there appeared to be many more snaking trails making straight for this position. I understood now that the beetle had used its hiss to send out a call for help.

*Damn it! can't I get a break? How can I possibly fight all these creatures?* I thought as I broke into a run for the rocks. I didn't think the rocks would protect me, but they might give me a defensible position and that was my best hope for now.

My vision seemed distorted though, as if something were blocking my view. I kept blinking but it wouldn't clear away. I ran on and with relief I reached the rocks before any of the bugs could arrive.

My bare feet were slapping on rocks now, the sand making sure-footing treacherous. I could not fall, I would not fall, I had to find something, some way to increase my odds at survival. At last I found a large boulder I could climb. It would give me about two meters of clearance from the ground. The best I could hope for at this point. I clambered up, barely making it to the crest of the rock before the scuttling beetles caught up with me, and I was out of time.

They broke from the sand in groups, swarming the rocks and scurrying helter skelter directly for me. All of them hissing and scraping chitinous claws as they charged. I couldn't count them there were just too many.

Perched on the rock I prepared as best I could with my staff. The first few arrived and they tried to climb it. Each insect desperately trying to get at me. The claws on the ends of their segmented legs couldn't gain purchase as easily as I had. Instead they could only stand on hind legs menacingly, forelegs scrabbling on the slippery rock face and force that horrible hiss through their pedipalps. Looking down at those huge mandibles clacking open and closed and the writhing mouthparts all reaching out for me, left me in no doubt that they wanted to eat me.

The big pincers, each half a meter in length snapped together like a pair of scissors, the glint of the sharp serrated inner edge terrifying in its wicked simplicity. With hundreds of these scythes arched and waving in my direction I felt no comfort standing above them, in fact I was terrified.

Gathering myself, I chopped down with my staff. Each time aiming for a killing blow, the hardened nub of my staff dripping beetle juice and ichor. Not every hit was successful though, but they came up for seconds and I gave it to them. I was really grateful for my elevated POV and began to hope, until I realized I was only making my problem worse.

By killing or stunning those first victims, their carcasses fell down and lessened the height for the next group to press their way up the side of the rock. By the time I realized what was happening I had already lost the fight.

I was completely surrounded with no escape and things had just gone from bad, to worse. It was infuriating and so were the blinking squares. I waved my hand in front of my face but it seemed to make no difference. The translucent squares were still in my vision and becoming more numerous. It was just a matter of time, but try as I might, I had no chance.

The beetles eventually swarmed over me. I used every ounce of strength, every trick I knew from my military days and martial arts training. No matter what I tried, I eventually had nothing left. They tore me to pieces. First, one of them managed to sever my ankle right off. Unbearable agony raced up my leg as the limb I had relied upon my entire life was just gone. What remained was only protruding jagged bones, stark white contrasted against the red of my fluids. Stringy sinews and copious amounts of blood and flesh tore off me. I fell gasping, unbalanced. They sliced off

parts of my other leg next. The stumps of both my limbs spewing hot gushes of blood into their open maws, their pedipalps like ravenous sponges dabbing the blood and slivers of flesh deeper into their mouths. The shock of it did absorb some of the pain, but my screaming mind kept fighting against what was happening. I just wanted to kill these creatures. To strike out at them. The blinking squares had almost covered my vision now, and that dark amber glow showed through my red-tinged lids. I was going into shock. My life ebbing away, and then just as suddenly the entire nightmare vanished.

I opened my eyes to see the stark white room again. “What the fuck just happened? a nightmare? Did I just dream about being ripped apart by dozens of fucking beetles? I shuddered and wanted to curl up and be alone for a while. I felt hopeless, stripped to the core and dismembered, literally. The elation of being free had quickly withered to a really dark and foreboding mood. To make it worse, Grant swam into my tear-streaked vision.

“Petros” he intoned in my mind. “Relax. You are okay. This is part of your training. You will need to absorb these lessons as we assess your psychic profile, build your skill-set, and test your abilities. Take a rest now, and I will be back for a more comprehensive report.” His comments seemed almost as if he cared. I was still freaking out I had just died.

A while later, I wasn’t sure how long with no reference to sun cycles or watches, I had time to reflect and consider my deteriorating vision. The squares were so numerous they were still distorting my vision. I suddenly realized that if I focused on them, the squares became clearer, more in focus. They appeared to have writing on them. I closed my lids, and the squares highlighted. It was as if I was staring at a computer screen. I blinked a few times then closed my eyes and focused again. The first square in the sequence said:

You have died from massive trauma. Shock has set in and your heart stopped beating exactly 47 minutes and 21 seconds into the simulation.

What could be more obvious than that? A bunch of bugs had just shredded me. I looked up at the red cross on the top left and wondered how

I could activate it to close the window. As soon as I thought it, the window closed and the next window in sequence became sharper.

Warning! Your Hit Points are below 5%.

I closed it too and looked at the next window.

You have sustained a laceration to your chest. Hit points reduced 3%

A slow sense of realization dawned on me. I was looking at instances of my actions from the most recent events to events further back in time. My eyelids were a damn computer interface. The whole experience had been a simulation. Convinced I was right, I continued to scan the square boxes. Each one had a similar tale of woe, with 'this sustained damaged' and various other technical terms to describe how fucked I was, but then one caught my eye.

You have struck a death blow to a Giant Stag Beetle. Experience gained.

Keep trying. Keep learning. Keep on surviving!

As I read these boxes, it seemed as if a voice was reading the box prompts to me in my mind. It wasn't my inner voice. At least I didn't think it was. I felt like I was finally coming to terms with what had just happened. Grant had mentioned something about training and if this was going to be my lot in life, I really didn't look forward to it.

Clearly these bastard aliens had embedded some kind of technology into my head that let me live and die in the simulation, and I wasn't looking forward to the next 'test'.

That the computer could projected a virtual reality into my thoughts with that much reality and attention to detail was some pretty advanced tech though. It hadn't really been my real body in there, even though it certainly felt like it. The idea of going back into that world was terrifying.



Getting the hang of the interface, I closed all the boxes and tried to gather my thoughts. What was going on here? Why was I being given this training? What benefit did it bring my captors to see me die like that? Did my interactions and experiences really have a bearing on how the aliens perceived humankind?

For the first time, I looked forward to seeing Grant again. I had so many questions. Before I saw him though, I felt the satiated sense of peace overwhelm me again. It must be feeding time. The catheter tube they had inserted to replace the needle in my stomach tugged a little as it pumped in the nutrient nirvana. My thoughts began to drift as the dark blackness of hopelessness engulfed me.

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**ARC**

**NOT FOR SALE**

# CHAPTER 3

## SWAMPED

My senses reeled as I awoke in a swamp. I felt well rested as if a full eight hours had passed. It hadn't helped my mood any, but my muscles were recharged.

I took note of my surroundings. It was humid, dank and muddy. There was vegetation everywhere I looked and that particular rotting musty smell common in swamps pervaded my senses. It made me want to breath through my mouth but for the thought of all the fungal spores, so I kept my mouth firmly closed and put up with the smell. The last thing I wanted was some weird alien fungus sprouting inside me and controlling my muscles and nerves.

I looked around for some idea on what I was supposed to do, but it seemed like I would have to wander around until some beastie decided I was lunch.

I closed my eyes and squeezed the bridge of my nose. I was tired of these games and really hoped my life wasn't going to be like this indefinitely.

Through my closed lids I noticed a blinking light. It was to my north. As I turned, the light changed position in my head and I realized it was some kind of compass, probably indicating a direction they wanted me to go. Stubbornly I gritted my teeth. These damn aliens could go to hell. I turned westwards as my stubborn streak dug in. They could put me in their sims and feed me to their beasts, but I definitely didn't have to follow their orders. I would find my own way around this place. besides I had a few skills in survival. It was time I put them to use.

After a short while traipsing through the mud and mangroves, slipping and squelching through the fetid swamp I finally found what I was looking for. A small tree with lots of young branches extending up. I broke them off and shaped the green twigs into makeshift snowshoes. Tying them off with

bark strips. I reasoned that they would help me slip-slide my way through the muddy terrain and lessen the risk of sinking into the quagmire. I also chose some choice sticks with sharpish ends as stabbing sticks. I chose a longer one for a spear and just started thinking about the useful staff I had had in the last simulation when it suddenly appeared in my hand. Surprised I dropped it. Then retrieved it from the mud. I had played a few games in my retirement. Particularly Call of Glory which allowed the characters to call forth different weapons as needed from an inventory. I guessed this was no different. I was in a simulation but its mechanics were game-like. It certainly had monsters. I had yet to meet any in this one though. Probably they were all waiting along the route I was supposed to take. I chuckled maliciously thinking I had thwarted the aliens.

I really couldn't believe this was a computer simulation though. Well, I could believe it, because what else could it be, but the realism was breathtaking. To simulate smells, sounds of birds, insects, trickling water, each and every leaf, not to mention all the physical mechanics like gravity, wind, sunlight, and textures like bark, and then to portray the layers within the plants after stripping the bark was phenomenal. It would most likely require a computer on the quantum scale. If nothing else had convinced me that the aliens were technologically advanced, then this certainly did.

I fashioned a makeshift belt and slid the sharp stakes into it. Then set about covering myself in mud. I knew from experience that it would keep off the biting bugs like mosquitoes and flies, which due to the realism in this sim were following me around with relish.

Setting off again I was feeling much better prepared for whatever was to come, with a spring in my step I set forth to face the unknown.

Half an hour passed and the drudgery and sameness of the sim began to wear on me. I had been strung out from the moment I arrived, expecting the worst but now as I grew fatigued and slid my way around this mud and mosquito infested place I felt bereft and hopeless. I knew there must be creatures here, or some kind of challenge. My thoughts began to drift as I lazily scratched my scrotum. It had been getting progressively itchy down there and the mud caking the area was getting dry and flaking off. At least the mosquitoes couldn't bite me, but they kept trying.

It was then that I felt something slither. It slithered over my scratching hand and I looked down in horror. From beneath my loincloth a large black slug looking creature slipped from the mud of my nether regions, over my hand and plopped into the mud at my feet. A shiver of absolute revulsion shook me as I realized what it was. A leech had been gorging on my junk. OMG! No! The absolute disgust I felt was a visceral thing and I immediately hopped from one foot to the other in agitation as I began to inspect myself. I should have considered this sooner I admonished myself, as I searched my body frantically for more of the repulsive creatures. On the other hand I was grateful that they weren't giant sized leeches or I would be a dried out husk by now.

While I pranced around inspecting for leeches, a silence settled over the jungle. All the insects stopped their chittering and even the birds grew silent.

My body search forgotten, I took stock of my surroundings once more. Only the wind rustling the leaves in the canopy and the constant drip of water could be heard. When the environment warned you that a predator was near, it was best to take note. I crouched down, picking up my discarded gear and looked about warily.

Whatever had disturbed them, it wasn't me. In fact the creatures of this place had paid me no mind whatsoever, so it had to be something else that was stalking around, and to have any chance of facing it, I had to notice it before it noticed me. When the silence persisted and nothing materialized, I began to relax. Perhaps it had moved on, I thought more hopefully than certain.

A shout suddenly broke the silence and my attention was drawn to an area through the trees. It was a human shout and it was angry. The shout surprisingly enough was also feminine. Deciding she very definitely needed help, I made my way forward as fast as my snowshoes sliding through mud would allow. By now the shoes had clogged with mud and were more of a hindrance than a help, but I doggedly persisted. Eventually I broke through the vegetation surrounding the area of the commotion and came upon a sight that left my mind stunned in consternation.

After everything that had happened to me, the abduction, the shock treatment, the subsequent bug dismemberment and now an entire morning

of being siphoned by mosquitoes and leeches I thought very little could surprise me, but this caught my attention and I stood mouth agape.

In an open area, quite devoid of trees, divided by a mudbank and a deep stretch of water, was a struggling woman. Upon her ankle was a very nasty looking alligator and it had a firm grip. It was swishing its tail and aggressively trying to wrench her off the mudbank and into the water. The woman, yes most definitely a woman, was clad only in a loincloth and was using her foot to try dislodge the alligator as she lay sprawled in the mud.

While on the opposite side of her, a very large feline beast had her forearm between its long, yellow teeth. It held on despite her best attempts to swat it away. The jaguar was dragging her in opposition to the alligator. Its feline face scrunched in fury, tawny fur speckled with rosettes. Its forelegs were scrabbling desperately for purchase and hind legs thrust deeply into the mud, back hunched, tail swishing in agitation as it fought for control of its prize. The tug-of-war between these top predators was the only reason the woman was still alive I thought to myself, but not for long, and knowing this was just a sim, and hoping it wasn't my last chance to live, I swished over the mud and thwacked the alligator on the head as hard as I could with my trusty staff.

Immediately a box appeared in my vision and I willed it away. I needed to focus on the fight, not some damn notification.

My blow had been as hard as I could generate under the circumstances, but it seemed to have had little or no effect on the scaly alligator. It's eye was damaged though and there seemed to be blood leaking out. This gave me my next idea and I sidled up to it and tried desperately to jab the smaller end of my staff into the eye. The first few attempts missed and all I got was the creature to writhe more and struggle to wrench the lady harder. She was grimacing and shouting and kicking for all she was worth. The cat snarled, and hissed through its mouthful as it pulled with greater force, wrenching her arm. I wasn't sure I was doing any good.

On about the fifth try I finally managed to get the narrow end of the staff against the half-closed eye-lid and I pushed as hard as I could. It resisted my shove, but then suddenly the staff slid into the eye and the substance inside oozed out like toothpaste. I then felt the staff break through the thin skull plate behind the eye as it slid all the way into the alligators brain. It released the woman immediately, arching back, my staff still stuck

through its eye, and began to spasm in death throes. I wasn't getting that staff back anytime soon.

Relief flooded through me that something had finally worked and I turned now to face the second and more pressing threat of the jaguar. The woman was trying to pry the jaguar's jaws open. The pressure must have been excruciating. Her terror-stricken face looked forlornly at me as the cat now had the leverage to pull her successfully towards the trees and away from the mudbank clearing. I grabbed the two stabbing sticks from my belt and charged. In for a penny, in for a pound.

My next brave action was completely unexpected as I face-planted deep into the muck. The muddy snowshoes had reached their breaking point and stuck fast. I only had time to take a breath as I fell face-first into the mud. Both sticks stabbing deep into the useless stinking bog.

Spluttering and spitting out the foul soup, I sat up gasping. I couldn't just sit there, the woman was going to be killed. I cleaned the muck from my eyes and to my surprise saw the cat had released the woman and was now spitting and coughing and most importantly retreating. When I fell, the huge splash of mud and water had hit the feline directly in the face. Some must have gotten into its airway and eyes. I got to my feet and charged again, waving my arms and trying to look as intimidating as possible. It was already retreating, but my charge seemed to hurry it along.

I moved forward to the woman. The jaguar meanwhile scampered off into the trees, injured pride and all, and left me standing panting alongside the extremely irate woman.

She was cradling her injured arm and it appeared to be broken from the jaguar's bite. Her leg was also twisted and swollen with deep gouges all along the calf and ankle. She was bleeding, but not too badly. Although it was hard to tell with everything covered in mud. I knelt next to her and asked, "Are you all right?"

"No, you asshole, I am not all right!" her reply was full of pain and hurt.

"God! What is going on!" she shouted, "and who the fuck are you?"

I tried to help her calm down, but frankly, I had no idea what she or I was doing here.

"What's your name?" I asked to distract her from her plight.

Between her panting and wincing, she replied, "Sarah Wilson. Yours?"

I smiled, "I'm Petros Arkansas."

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# CHAPTER 4

## A FRIENDSHIP FORGED

It turns out Sarah was an abductee too. This was her first simulation, and she had been overcome with despair when placed in this hostile swamp. She also had the blinking internal light to the north in her vision, but had not moved forward as yet.

I used some bark strips to bind her arm against her chest, allowing her arm to cover her breasts. I could see she was a little uneasy about her nudity but I just continued as if it didn't matter. I collected my staff from the dead alligator's carcass and gave it to her to use as a crutch. I wanted to get us away from here as soon as possible.

Figuring that the big cat would be back soon I hoped the alligator carcass would be enough food for it and it would leave us off the menu for the time being.

Sarah was in full agreement and we stumbled off. This time I gave in to our overlords wishes and headed towards the blinking beacon. If nothing else, it was something to cling to, I guess. As human beings, we need goals. I was hoping the goal was something we wanted.

As we shuffled along in the mud and slime, we made small talk and I found out that Sarah was also from the United States, but from Florida, whereas I was from the Midwest. She was also ex-military. A Marine Force Recon with an honorable discharge after a two-year stint in the Afghanistan fiasco. Her active service was spent manning the gun-mounts on troop transport birds.

When a Rocket propelled grenade took her bird out of the sky near Kandahar, she miraculously survived unscathed, and they gave her the option to stay on for another year and join one of the ground pounder units or quit while she was ahead and go home. With none of her regular crew surviving the fateful helicopter crash, she tried to leave all the madness behind and make a living as a civilian.



Sarah was also an orphan, living alone when the aliens came for her. She had a small ranch out in the middle of nowhere. According to her, there was no-one who would check in on her soon and when they found her gone, they would not be worried. The aliens it seemed had been very thorough and selective in who they took. I certainly wasn't going to be missed either.

It was hard to see what she looked like clearly with all the mud, but she insisted her hair was blonde. She was easily 1.8 meters tall. I was just a few centimeters taller at 1.9 meters. Her athletic figure was heavy though as my shoulder supporting her twinged in protest. She was lean and trim though, so it must be heavy bones or else I was just not as strong and fit as I once had been.

Without the snowshoes, we were making slow progress. Her stumbling limbs pressing her deep into the mud and making it harder and harder with each step. We were both exhausted especially after that adrenaline-filled fight. We needed food and rest soon.

After a few hours of crashing and bumbling our way through the swamp, I noticed it was getting dark. This simulation was taking much longer than the previous one, so I assumed it would continue until I achieved some kind of goal or was killed in the process. Remembering all the box prompts I had minimized, I decided to have a look at what they were saying.

You have struck a swamp alligator a stunning blow. 7% damage.  
Additional Critical Damage of 10%, The Alligator is stunned.

You have struck a swamp alligator. 1% damage.

You have struck a swamp alligator. 2% damage.

You have struck a swamp alligator. 1% damage.

You have struck a swamp alligator. 0.5% damage.

You have struck a critical death blow. Your staff has pierced the eye and brain causing critical damage. Swamp alligator dies.

Experience gained. You have gained experience.  
Keep trying. Keep building. Keep on surviving.

You have temporarily blinded Swamp Jaguar. Jaguar is blind for 10 seconds. You have caused a Swamp jaguar to choke. 1% damage.

Becoming more accustomed to controlling the pop-ups, I closed the prompts and asked Sarah if she knew about them.

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked. “Are you saying this isn’t real?”

I looked at her haggard, drawn face, mud streaks through her hair, body covered in grime and nodded.

“Yes, all of this...” I showed us, and all around us with a gesture from my hand, “... doesn’t really exist. We are being given challenges, a kind of test and as we kill things we get experience points or those things kill us. I’m not sure what happens if we make it through this simulation, but from my experience of computer games, it means we will power up. We will gain new abilities and be stronger, smarter, faster, and so on for the next game.”

Sarah paused in her limping and pushed me away from her.

“What are you talking about Petros? How can this not be real?”

“Have you noticed a distortion in your vision? strange colors and blocks? Remember, you said you saw the blinking directional beacon?” I asked pointedly.

She paused then and looked at me intently. “Now that you mention it...” She murmured thoughtfully and from her faraway look, I could see she was finally noting the pop-up translucent boxes in her vision. There must have been a lot. I waited until she came back to the now.

“Oh! My! God! You are right Petros. It lists all the damage I have taken. It says I will have to wait for my health to regenerate or take something to boost it. Do you have something that could boost my health?”

I looked around and shushed her. “Not so loud, there is still danger here. We have to figure a way to survive and get to the blinking beacon. Don’t

ask me how I know, but I do. If we get there, I don't know if we will be safe, but at least we will have achieved a goal. Perhaps get experience points and get stronger. Regarding your health boost, from the Roleplaying games I have played, you usually gain health by eating something or resting.“

“But we also have to be smart.” I continued, “I think we weren't supposed to meet, but now we have met, the aliens are letting us continue to see what we do. My controller is named Grant. He told me I'm being tested and trained.”

“Mine's Oscar, and he told me nothing about this. I was just injected with something in my stomach and couldn't do anything about it. I passed out after and woke up in this swamp. I thought they had discarded me back on Earth in a random place.”

We continued on while chatting. It was nice to think of something else besides our immediate situation.

I noticed a small clearing, which I thought would be a great place for resting up overnight. Whether we would get any sleep was another matter altogether. Time was hard to predict, but at a guess, I would say we had been in the simulation just over six hours. The area appeared to be getting darker as if dusk was settling in. The sun was low on the horizon, so roughly two hours before full dark would blanket us.

As we moved into the flattened area, with relatively compact mud, and a barrier of tree roots surrounding on three sides I asked Sarah what she knew about survival out in the wilds.

“As a marine, surely you have survival skills? What do you suggest we do in this clearing?”

Stumbling in, Sarah looked around, “Well, if this was a training situation, I would have some way to make a fire, but everything is wet. We don't even have basic equipment to use. With nothing but my loincloth, it makes it difficult to think of what to contribute. I am feeling warm though. The exercise and mud that is covering me kept a lot of the heat in. I'm not sure how cold it will get during the night, or how the bugs will bother us. Perhaps we should put another layer of mud on before we set up for the night?”

She looked at me expectantly and I shrugged taking my time to reply. “Yep, that's what I was thinking. Although I am worried about your wounds. Those cuts on your arm and leg won't be doing well with all that

muck on them. But the rest of you could do with another layer of mud. Be warned, I found a leech on my... um scrotum earlier, so if you itch anywhere it's most likely one of them."

Sarah's face blanched as she took that in, "Yuck! Leeches are my worst nightmare. How did you get rid of it or is it still... you know, attached?"

The conversation was getting awkward and I might even have blushed if our situation wasn't so precarious.

"Actually, it fell off when I scratched the area, they usually fall off after gorging themselves. Hopefully, there are not so many that we wake up as dried out husks. I'm not sure if this simulation will make us into zombies, but I doubt it." My attempt at levity brought a pained smile out of her, and we both continued to the edge of the clearing to get some mud.

Sarah just plopped down and using her one free hand scooped clumps of mud on her hair, face, and body. I helped by scooping mud to her. Then added some to myself. The lower half of me had been getting a consistent supply of mud during our laborious hike so it didn't take long. Then, using a pool of relatively clearer water, I cleaned her ankle and bite marks. The alligator had done more damage than I originally thought, and it amazed me how strong her mind had to be to walk with that wound for as long as we did.

After cleaning away most of the muck, I chewed some leaves and pith from bark and placed the pulp on the open wounds. I didn't think the plants had healing properties, but I figured that the enzymes in my spit would be better for her cuts than the mud. After applying the pasty results, I wrapped them with leaves and then used strips of wet bark as a bandage. To top it off, I applied a mud layer. Her wound hadn't looked good and if we remained in this swamp for much longer, she would get very sick and infected.

Leaving Sarah to make her own way back to the central clearing with my handy staff, I tried to get more vegetation from the surrounding trees. Using my hands I tore small saplings, leaves, and branches off, the greener the better.

Then gathering all the material together, I took it back to the campsite. This would be our bedding.

A thought struck me. Wait a minute, we are in a swamp. There are smaller dangers here besides alligators and jaguars. What about snakes? With extra vigilance, I headed out again to get more vegetation. The

thought was now playing on my mind, and I thoroughly inspected every branch or clump of leaves I collected.

I found lots of frogs and insects, some worm creatures too. Then I heard a slow hissing, like a kettle on the boil with the steam hissing out the spout. Looking down and to my left, I found what was causing it. Yep. It was a snake all right. It was easily about five meters long, and had a large muscular body and beady black eyes. The forked tongue was flicking at me in agitation. It was a constrictor snake for sure. Maybe a python? Too small to be an anaconda, or maybe it was a baby one of those? Whatever it was, it was looking at me with suspicious eyes as it glided sinuously through the swamp. Gently swishing through the muddy waters. What made it especially unusual was that it had a very large bulge in its body about one-third of the length down. Sighing with relief I realized it had recently had a meal and was just looking for a safe place to hang out. It was not interested in eating me at all. I made some threatening gestures, and this seemed to dissuade it from coming closer. Instead, it turned around, still hissing threateningly and headed back to where it had come from.

Deciding not to tell Sarah, I headed back to the encampment with the new haul of vegetation. I then spent the good part of an hour creating a barricade in addition to the natural one of the trees surrounding us. I didn't believe for one second that things would be easy during the night.

Resting up here was our best option. It made little sense to be stumbling around in the dark. As much of a simulation as this was, it felt real, and so I would treat it as a real life and death situation as much as possible. I didn't want to experience death again and the blinking light in the distance was a beacon of hope that kept my goals focused.

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# CHAPTER 5

## ALLIGATOR ALLEY

It was fully dark, and the jungle came alive with the nocturnal denizens. Frogs, insects and other critters croaked, screeched and chittered in a cacophony of noise.

Sarah and I were back-to-back in our little clearing. It had cooled down a lot from the humidity of the day, and I think we both derived comfort from our proximity. The back-to-back contact gave me a sense of having my six covered. Being ex-military, I am sure Sarah felt the same. I could feel her shivering from time-to-time, whether it was from her wounds, the stress or because she was feeling cold, I could not tell. We had said little, each deep in our own thoughts. I eventually broke the silence.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “pass some of that pizza?”

This brought a snort of amusement from Sarah. She leaned her head back against me and said, “Why are you named after a state?” It was my turn to laugh.

“After everything that’s happened, you want to know about my name?”

“Well, according to you, this is a simulation, right? So it’s not real. I would rather focus on what IS real,” she replied.

I sighed. “It’s a long story, and I haven’t told it to many. Government secrets and all that.”

Again she laughed, but it was a hollow laugh.

“Petros, I have lots of government secrets in my head, but one thing I am certain of, is that you are not a US government secret, I can tell by your accent you aren’t even from the US.”

My shoulders stiffened, maybe she felt it.

“Well, on that score you would be wrong. I think I am at least three governments’ secret, but I haven’t remained anonymous and out of harm's way by mouthing off to everyone I meet.”

Now it was her turn to stiffen. She turned her head.

“You aren’t serious, are you?”

After a few moments of indecision, I replied: “As serious as a hurricane, although where I originally come from we don’t call them hurricanes, we call them cyclones.”

She mused for a moment then replied, “That is interesting, it means you come from the southern hemisphere, but you don’t have an Australian accent, and you definitely are not Latino, so that cuts out South America too. But okay fine, you keep your secrets for now. Do me a favor though and tell me where you learned all this bushcraft? You seem quite at home in this place. I have had some survival training, but nothing that could have prepared me for our current situation. You seem to take it all in stride.”

“Quiet!” I hissed at her.

“Damn I wasn’t meaning to...”

I turned and placed my hand in front of her face to stop her finishing what she was saying. During our conversation, I had noticed that the area around our camp had become deathly quiet. Hardly a bug or frog was making a noise. It was as if someone had thrown a blanket over our heads. All you could hear was the trickle of water and the swish of vegetation.

Sarah realized the urgency and cut off what she was saying and pushed my hand firmly away. It was dark now and I could hardly see anything.

My ears became instruments of detection and I closed my eyes, trying to hear what was approaching us.

Softly, almost delicately, I could hear a gentle movement just outside our perimeter. The swish, creak and crack of vegetation being moved deliberately, the squelch of mud as a paw was placed carefully. It moved lightly, but with deadly purpose. I could sense its presence. Something was right there just outside our little clearing, just beyond the barrier. Staring at us through the vegetation. It had stopped moving and as I listened I could hear a rasping rumble of harsh breathing.

Abruptly I jumped to my feet, screamed as loudly as I could. Smashing my staff into the leaves and branches above and around me, I created as much noise and snarling menace as my adrenalin filled body could produce. Sarah who had been straining her ears to listen was equally as startled as the predator outside our campsite and she shouted too. It ended quickly with a crash of underbrush and a squelching of mud as whatever it was fled the scene as fast as it could manage.

Thankfully, it had chosen the flight mode instead of fight mode.  
“I think it’s gone now, you can stop shouting.”



“Shit! Petros, I nearly crapped myself,” exclaimed Sarah. “Warn a person before you do that again.”

Laughing, as much to relieve my own tension as at her comment, I hunkered down to our previous position. “Sorry about that, without decent weapons, we have to pretend our bite is bigger than our bark, and our bark has to be the meanest bark in the neighborhood. We should probably get some sleep. You can sleep first, I will wake you later and you can guard for a while. I don’t know how long this simulation will continue the dark cycle, but I’m sure that won’t be our only visitor tonight.”

I was wrong. It seemed our strange disturbance had warned all potential predators to stay away and so we had a relatively unmolested night if you discount the mosquitoes.

Morning came with a suddenness. One minute I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face and the next, shadows of trees and foliage emerged into view around me. Sarah had woken me a few hours before to take the last guard shift. I had gotten little sleep overall, and I was feeling really hungry. I wondered if we should eat or if we could make the rendezvous without that necessity. Thinking about necessity, I hadn’t needed to visit the W.C. since I arrived. I guessed my body was being cared for, while my mind wandered around in never-never swamp. Something I was grateful for. If the military had simulations like this, they would be ecstatic.

I turned to wake Sarah. She was lying in the fetal position on the vegetation. Appearing as a huge lump of clay in the early dawn light. The muddy strands of her hair sticking out in every direction. Honestly, not the best way to make an impression, but then I doubted I was any better.

Touching her shoulder, she startled awake. Glaring bleary-eyed at me.

“Coffee and breakfast are served, Ma’am,” I said solemnly, trying to keep a straight face.

Blinking mud and debris from her face Sarah groaned and did a stretch. Now we may have been covered in mud, but when Sarah stretches, she incorporates her whole body. Both hands stretched up and her mud encrusted chest thrust out. It was a sight to behold. She noticed me staring and covered her chest.

“Pervert!” she muttered, and I flushed. Yep, Caught. What can I say? I’m a guy.

Turning around, I said, “We should get moving before the predators of this place make us into breakfast. Isn’t it strange that everything else around here has hunger issues, and yet we don’t even get room service? I think I will lodge a complaint when we get back.” My corny joke fell flat and didn’t work as a deflection either.

“If we get back,” Sarah intoned ominously.

“Oh my God!” Sarah exclaimed. I spun to see her cause for concern. She was staring at her arm.

“What?” I was still fuzzy from lack of sleep.

“Look, Petros, my arm is healed. Oh, and my leg too. It doesn’t feel painful anymore.” I moved over and wiped away the mud and protective layers I had put on the previous evening.

Sure enough, it was completely healed. I even squeezed it for good measure but she showed no signs of discomfort. Her arm though, was still a little tender but the bite marks had healed over. I couldn’t be certain, but it seemed like there were some scars. I wondered if those would remain.

“Those must be special healing plants” I exclaimed. “Or else my spit has regenerative properties I did not know about.” This brought a wry smile from both of us and she playfully punched my arm.

“I feel so refreshed and energetic. Do you think this simulation recharges and heals people overnight?”

Pondering her words, I thought about it. Many of the Role-playing game’s I had played had that benefit. Especially if you had rested, then you recovered health and stamina. It might explain why I didn’t feel so energetic having stayed up for most of the night.

“I think you are onto something there, come on, let’s get to that beacon. Maybe our controllers will reward us with information if we get there. My direction light is blinking faster, almost as if it is urging me on.” Sarah nodded. “Mine too. At least we don’t have to hobble all day.”

“Ah yes, now you mention it, I think we need to weaponized you.” I cleared the barrier I had constructed during the night. Some sticks I had used to support the structure were long and sharp. I broke off excess branches and had three relatively long stabbing sticks. Each about three feet long. The points weren’t exactly pencil sharp, but the ends were tapered where I had broken them off.

Sarah meanwhile had taken off her makeshift bandages and gladly accepted two of the spears. I kept one and gathered up my staff. Looking out at the

swampy terrain I decided we needed snowshoes if we wanted to get anywhere, so with our bedding and the rest of the sticks I had used for the barrier we sat down and made the shoes.

It turns out Sarah was better at this than I, and with deft hands, she had her snowshoes done in half the time I took. She then helped me and we made off towards the rapidly blinking light of our internal compass.

Sarah was perky and full of energy and I was lethargic and awkward. It made for slow progress. I wasn't usually this moody, but the sleepless night was affecting me badly. After about an hour, I began to lag. Just focusing on dragging one mud encrusted foot after the other. We had spotted a lot of animal tracks, but besides a few alligators, lizards and fast furry things that didn't keep still long enough for us to identify, we saw nothing that posed a danger to us. So when the strike happened, I hardly noticed except for a burning sensation on my calf. As the burning intensified, I swatted at it carelessly, thinking I was being molested by another biting insect. With all the mud and leeches on my body, I hardly cared. Except that the burning pain felt like fire.

"Sarah" I croaked. "I think something has bitten me." She turned around now, about three or four meters in front of me.

"My leg, it's burning like fire. Something bit me." It was then I noticed the viper. My heart nearly stopped beating in shock. Its triangle head and forked tongue probing forward in threatening gestures. The body coiled and writhing to strike again. It looked like a Cottonmouth viper and it could be the only reason my leg was burning. With the surge of adrenaline came clarity, and I used the sticks I had to poke at it. Its strike was fast. Lightning quick. The stick jarred in my hand as it struck, then seeing it had an escape route as Sarah approached, it turned and slithered off into the mire.

Gasping I sat down in the mud and tried to clean the area on my leg where it had bitten. The two puncture marks were clear on the right side of my calf, bleeding freely and the burning sensation was extreme like someone was forcing a hot poker into my skin, branding my flesh.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I hissed. "That was a viper." Sarah had come up to me and was staring wide-eyed at the bite.

"Quick," she said, "we need to make a tourniquet."

Through gritted teeth, I said, "First check that the snake has gone, and there aren't any other bastards about. Knowing my luck a pack of wild mofo's will attack us at any moment."

Sarah beat the bush around us and made sure nothing was hiding in the undergrowth. She then got some vines and a short stick. Platting the vines into a rudimentary rope. She placed it around my thigh and using the stick, began to twist until the blood flowing from the bite slowed to a trickle. Lying back as she did this, I wracked my brain on what I was supposed to do when bitten by a snake. I know everyone says, "Keep calm!" Whoever came up with that ridiculous notion had not had a snakebite before.

"You mustn't suck it," I said, and Sarah's ministrations stopped, and through my grimace, I looked up at her. She was smiling and looking down at my nether regions. Realizing what I had just blurted out, I tried to push my loincloth down to cover my jewels.

"You big dope," Sarah said, smirking. "I doubt they designed the simulation for THAT."

Huffing a strangled laugh, I mumbled, "I didn't mean that, I said don't suck it. Don't suck the bite. People used to cut the wound and suck out the poison. These days they say don't do it as it makes it worse. However squeezing and extracting the venom can drastically reduce the affliction."

"Wow, look at me," Mocked Sarah, "all hoity-toity and proper definitions and all that. Look, I'm just a Jarhead. Tell me what to do and I'll do it. How can I help you? Do you need me to suck it?"

I looked at her through my scrunched eyes and saw the wry smile. She was still trying to be humorous and deflect me from the pain.

"How often have I had this kind of conversation?" I thought aloud and burst into manic laughter. Sarah joined me, and we both laughed off the tension.

"Okay clean all venom from the area. Try squeezing the wound to extract as much poison as you can and then let's get out of here. I for one am sick and tired of this swamp."

With determination from Sarah and a lot of squealing from me, we did it. I could feel that something was wrong inside me though. The burning was not localized and seemed to spread up my leg with each awkward step. It labored my breathing and my body was sweating profusely. The tourniquet seemed to be working, so at least the poison was draining slowly into my system. Knowing it was a viper meant the poison was cytotoxic, so it would

damage my cells in the general area of the wound more than anything else. It would not paralyze my nervous system but could affect my heart and internal organs. There was nothing more to be done about it. I wanted to reach the destination without dying. We had to continue on.

It was now my turn to hobble along as we made our way through the swamp. I struggled onward, discarding the snowshoes, as they didn't work while limping. Sarah was next to me the whole time, dragging me, supporting me and sometimes pushing me. When the way was blocked, we went around or crashed on through. How many hours passed I could not say.

At last we came to a wide-open area devoid of trees. It stretched out for miles before us. A vast expanse of water with islands and sand banks interspersed at random intervals. On either side of us were great clumps of reeds and vegetation and various muddy banks. I grimaced as the many alligators sunning themselves noticed us and slid ominously into the murky waters. Our blinking beacon showed an island about half a click out. It would require a swim. A swim through alligator-infested waters.

Perhaps it was the last straw of this obstacle or the effects of the poison and pain. I just sat down and wanted to give up. My wound was leaking blood. I needed to release the tourniquet, but I just didn't care anymore. If I died, then maybe this simulation could end. Maybe I could find some peace. Maybe, just maybe I could find my eternal rest.

A sharp slap to my face made me come back to my senses. Sarah was shaking me after slapping me and holding some water in the cup of her palm. I struggled to sip it, but the cooling effect of the water sliding down my parched throat seemed to help me gather my thoughts. I then indicated a large tree we had passed.

"Get some of those leaves and see if you can use them like a cup. I will need a lot more water and that will hold more volume than your hand will."

"Also, we should probably not be drinking this water directly, but if you can make a sand sieve, using one of our loincloths, it might be okay."

"See Petros, this is what I mean. All this survival stuff comes naturally to you, where did you learn it? You didn't tell me last night. And by the way, there is no chance I'm taking off my loincloth, so we will have to use yours."

Whether it was my condition or the harmless nature of her request, I told her. What harm could it do? It had started over 30 years ago anyway. Besides, I retired from the service more than five years before. There were no dangerous secrets anymore.

“Well, I was Special Forces in South Africa a long time ago.” I said, “After the ‘New South Africa’ fiasco, you know they rescinded apartheid law. It changed how the military operated and they disbanded my unit. I left before the fall and the British government hired me to give their special forces some very specific training and then later Uncle Sam hired me to do the same. It was a long time ago, and I had to hide my identity and origins. The US gave me a new identity and a new life. I retired about five years ago, after active service and consultancy for the best part of 25 years, but the training becomes part of you. Well, you know that, you were in the Marines, so you understand.”

Sarah eyed me speculatively. “Well damn! I think I’ve heard of you. You were helping the spooks in the Sandbox.” Sarah exclaimed, using the US term for Iraq.

“There was some Rumint about an ex-South African Spec-ops consultant. They were never clear about what you did exactly, but I know some Delta Force guys and they said you were a real bastard and they owed their lives to your training and intel dumps. I always thought it was strange because I never even thought a country like South Africa would have a special forces unit, not only that but in the US military you either trained or became part of active service, but seldom is there someone training while still actively operating. Come to think of it, wasn’t your call sign... what was it again? I remember thinking it was the weirdest call sign ever. Oh, yes! It was Armpit.”

I smiled and then cracked up into a laughing coughing fit.

After a short time I got my laughing under control and trying to downplay my notoriety, “Yep, you may have stumbled on one of my secrets, and the name was ‘Oom Piet’ which means ‘Uncle Peter’ but some Texan officer got the accent all wrong on the Afrikaans pronunciation, so when he said it, it sounded like ‘Arm Pit’. You know how the military is, that’s the definition of how nicknames are born. So I became Armpit. Although definitely, I was much less involved than what any of those rumors suggested.”

“Right!” She said, drawing out the ‘i’ sound, “So what did you do exactly?”

And what was so special it needed a name change? You aren't some kind of assassin are you?"

And there it was, the one question they programmed me to never answer.

Deflecting again, I said, "You see that driftwood on those banks? Do you think you could collect the bigger logs together and we make a raft? I for one am not keen on getting my arse eaten by alligators."

"That's a brilliant idea, Petros," she smiled, "... or should I call you Armpit? Don't think I haven't noticed you avoiding my questions again. But for now, I think we really need to get out of here. Have you noticed that the blinking beacon is blinking twice as fast?"

Sarah was right; the blinking was so fast it was hardly discernible as separate pulses. Whatever event was about to happen, it would happen soon, definitely today. I for one didn't want to stick around to find out what that would be, I wanted out of this sim.

A short while later an outraged scream echoed through the area. It was followed by splashing which startled me out of my reverie. I sat up and looked for Sarah. With relief I saw her walking along the waters edge, dragging some driftwood stumps along the shore. I continued to look for the disturbance further out into the body of water. To my horror, someone, perhaps another player, was in a life and death struggle with a group of alligators, right in the middle of the lake. His screams were gurgles now, as several of the beasts had limbs and were not giving him any time to surface. And then suddenly it was deathly quiet. The swirls of the alligators as they continued to shred their victim under water rippled the surface. It was both eerie and appalling. A small pool of dissipating blood the only memorial of his passing. I wanted to act, to do something, rush to rescue him. So what if my leg was messed up? He needed help. I could see the horror I was experiencing mirrored on Sarah's face too. She was staring out over the ominous waters at the island we were supposed to meet and silent tears were falling from her miasmic stare.

"Sarah!" I called, "Sarah, don't think about it. Suck it up. Whoever he was, he was just like us and they will revive him. Remember this is just a simulation."

She turned to me then, coming back to herself, and stifling a sniff. "That could have been me, Petros, yesterday, that could have been me." I could

see that Sarah, as tough as she was, was also beginning to fray. These aliens knew how to push our buttons.

She turned to look at the spot where the man had disappeared. He must have climbed into the water a few hundred meters to our left and made for the blinking light without considering the alligators. It was a horrible way to go. I knew exactly how it felt to be dismembered by critters. We would likely join his fate if we didn't get a decent size raft going. We bent to the task with determination until finally we had something that would float us across the water.

Picking the longest stumps, easily two and three meters long, I used them as the keel, placing the other branches perpendicular to create our raft. The raft was possibly the ugliest, most useless looking floating device I ever had the misfortune to associate myself with, but needs must when the Devil drives, and that blinking light had suddenly become amber. Still blinking at lightning fast speeds. We were under the pump, being driven beyond our limits to achieve the impossible.

My heart was so labored, my leg burned with every twitch, but I dug deep and persevered. Sarah helped a lot. She was strong, strong-willed and determined. Some of those logs and branches she brought were waterlogged and heavy, but she pushed herself and eventually collected enough that could serve our purpose.

The whole time we labored, the alligators observed us. Some would drift near but kept their distance. Sarah would poke at them with her sharp spear to discourage them. The biggest ones were happy to stay in the deeper waters, knowing it was just a matter of time before we ventured into their domain.

The design of the raft was interesting. Besides the usual flat base, I had made an 'A' frame, using groupings of logs, tied together with vines, all meeting, and crossing at the apex of the raft.

There we bound them and inserted a rudimentary mast. At this pinnacle, we built a sort-of crow's nest. The place that sailors of old sailing ships used to climb to, to get a good view of the surrounding seas. This one wasn't high, perhaps one and a half meters from the base. Then using interwoven vines, twigs, and sapling bark we build two nets that could hold us.

The raft would keep us afloat, but the alligators would swarm it; Thus, if we were mounted above them, out of harms way, they could not get at us.



It was a gamble, but we were out of time and there were no other options. This would have to do.

We slowly pushed the raft to the water's edge. Sarah using her sticks, cleared the way and encourage the alligators to back off. They didn't seem to mind, opting to wait with their larger brethren in the deeper waters to observe our raft monstrosity from a safer distance.

Faced with the tricky part and hoping the threads we had platted together would hold, we mounted the raft, which promptly sank with our weight. I could feel something anchoring it in the mud and figured the water we were in was too shallow. I didn't really know if the raft would support us, but hoped that the physics of this simulation were as real as possible. Thus, the volume displaced by the wooden base and hull would be equal to what we could safely float above it.

"Sarah, you climb into the crow's nest and I will push us into deeper waters."

"But what about your leg? You won't be able to get on and fight off the alligators."

"Just do it," I said, "I will be okay." Actually, I was feeling nauseous and ill, my body had been experiencing fits of sweating and nausea at more regular intervals, but I reasoned I had been in worse scraps so I would just have to push on through.

I placed my feet in the mud and with a huge effort of will as much as strength I heaved and lifted and thrust forward. It hardly budged. It moved a little though, so with tremendous effort I tried again. And again. Eventually it broke free of the clinging mud. At last, it bobbed invitingly, just out of reach. I dived forward, my hands grabbed the twine and I heaved myself onboard. This seemed to be a signal for all the alligators, which surged forward as one. All of them determination to make me into their next menu item.

Kicking frantically, I continued to clamber on, swearing the whole way. It was the only way I could keep my focus.

Nausea clutched at my belly and despite several mock charges, I got myself into the middle of the raft, clasping to the mainmast. The few alligators that had arrived also clambered on, but they were small, the biggest about half a meter. I kicked out at them and convinced them not to trifle with me. I had to get up into the crow's nest.

We were drifting in the right direction, but it was also the direction into deep waters full of much bigger predators. I felt like we had jumped out the pot into the fire. Sarah was using a long branch with a flattened edge to paddle us in a direct line. Her rowing was uneven though and was making us turn every which way. I really had to get into the netting to balance out our unstable craft.

Feeling faint as I hauled myself up, another bout of nausea hit me causing me to double over. I held it in. Not willing to give an inch. I clambered my aching, sweating body up and eventually found my position in the net. Sarah's hands reached down at the end and grabbed my hair at one point. It wasn't pretty, but with a growing feeling of elation. I clambered into my hammock. I realized we had done it. We weren't on the island yet, but we were closer and we were making progress.

It was then that the raft tilted precariously. Both of us gasped aloud and looked to see what had caused the tilt.

Right on the aft deck, starboard side, almost exactly where I had clambered on, a huge and menacing alligator was attempting to get on our raft. Sarah swung her makeshift oar to thunk it on the snout. Whether this had any damaging effect I couldn't tell, but what it did was cause the huge beast to snap at her branch, this caused the raft to tilt and the many logs and sticks that made up the base to shift. Its foreleg slipped in between two of the logs and when it tried to pull the leg back, it jammed solid.

The large and disturbingly strong beast began to panic. Thrashing menacingly, with incredible strength it attempted to get free. The ensuing pandemonium rocked the raft relentlessly. Our hard work of weaving and plating ropes to hold the logs together was coming apart at the seams. Stuck in the crow's nest, we swung around mercilessly. I had no plan, no idea; I just clung on for dear life. Sarah had lost her oar, and the one I was supposed to use was also about to get lost.

This carried on for a while and I began to vomit. The water I had drunk earlier came out with projectile ease.

Sarah's subsequent swearing told me I was vomiting into the wind. We both lost all sense of direction and purpose and clung on relentlessly. The makeshift nets we were in did a lot to keep us safe in our position, but we

didn't feel safe and if one of the threads broke we would be flung into the lake only to be eaten at their leisure.

The alligator's thrashing continued, its agitated state making it swish its tail, tilting this way and that. At one stage I felt wind and water spray from the speed it was forcing us through the water. My sickness and nausea from the snakebite were all that I could think about though when suddenly with a final jolt, the raft came free of the alligator and I had time to gather my bearings.

With trepidation, I realized that the alligator had propelled us towards the shore. Its thrashing tail pushing us to within a few meters of land. I looked for the beacon and realized that this was the island. This was it. It had propelled us directly to our destination before it got free.

At last, something was coming right for us. Sarah was still wiping my puke from her face, making lots of retching sounds herself. "Quickly, get that last oar and see if we can get to the island." I exclaimed. This seemed to get her attention and seeing her wretched expression change to one of elation was one of my highlights from this whole experience. Small mercies.

The bump on the back of the raft showed that another two alligators were about to clamber on the strange craft that had distressed their comrade so. The tattered remains of the rear binding floating freed and useless behind us. It was at this point that the raft bumped against the island's muddy bank. We were still about five meters from the shore.

Clambering down from the nets, bruised, beaten and weary, we dived shallowly forward into the water, our only objective to get onto the land as soon as humanly possible.

Again luck played its part. The splayed aft section of our raft hindered the beasts and gave us the chance to land safely.

So frustrated by our escape, one of the alligators followed us right out of the water, but Sarah too had had enough. Her angry shouting form bashed at it with my trusty staff. It promptly changed its mind and raced back to the safety of the water. We in turn made our way higher onto the island and towards the beacon that had guided us to this point and place in time.

Cresting the immediate rise we stared in vain for something that would show our journey was at an end. However, if there was something, a wall of

vegetation blocked it. I was glad to note that the island was compact and not swampy. It made my shuffling limping more productive. I was beyond the point of no return, perhaps even hallucinating. Especially when Sarah gripped my arm in response to a group of people who broke from cover and hurried over to help us. They moved like wraiths.

Appearing from the foliage like specters. Both Sarah and I just stopped and stared, mouth agape. We were in total shock. I couldn't form coherent thought and needed a moment for the excitement and adrenaline to slow so I could process this new situation. I was nauseous again and began dry retching as human arms grabbed me and dragged me into the thicket. They were strong men, five.

The first man, a burly hairy fellow with a gruff voice and a Scottish accent said "It's going to be okay laddie, you are safe now." He held a gourd to my lips, and I gulped in what I could. The bitter taste was refreshing and almost immediately I felt a cool sensation on my leg that seemed to quench the fires of the snake venom. Within minutes it had subsided to a dull ache and my shivering, fevered, and nauseous body began to relax as this new reality took hold. I read the prompt that popped up in my vision.

You drank from an all purpose health potion. Your ailments are a thing of the past.

Health is restored

Stamina is rejuvenated

Mana pool replenished

What the hell had just happened?

# CHAPTER 6

## THE WAY OF THE PRODIGY

“Welcome,” said the man who had fed me the potion. “I’m Stone McGee.”

“How does that leg feel? It looked a pretty nasty bite. One of the viper critters get ye?”

“What? Oh, the snake bite? Yes, a viper, the poison has a real kick to it.” I answered wryly. “The drink you gave me, how did you get it?”

“Long story mate, can’t tell you right now and more important things are afoot, first things first, you and the lass here need to touch the beacon, and if I’m not mistaken, you will be the last of the new recruits to arrive, so when you get back, we will welcome you to the unit”

He showed a large rock in the center of a clearing. It seemed to hum to me in sync with the blinking beacon light. I stumbled forward, adjusting to my newfound health and reached out to touch the rock. As I did it, a lot of things happened.

First thing I noticed was my vision went dark and looking around I found myself in a large hall. The second thing I noticed was that before me in a long line were effigies of myself. Each differed slightly in their garb and items they were holding. They were all highlighted by an inner glow, making them stand out with a subtle glow in the dark. I looked around for the group I had been with just seconds before, but it was as if they did not exist. I was all alone.

In front of me was a small pillar. It glowed seductively, a throbbing light source coercing me to touch it. I deliberately resisted the impulse.

Instead, I went towards the first effigy and above the statue a name appeared identifying it, and below it, a scrolling text box appeared in the air before me, so I bent my will to read it.

RANGER
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A ranger has a wide array of skills aligned with survival in different
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worlds. The ranger needs to further develop skills in agility, stamina, strength, intelligence, and wisdom. A Ranger's hit points are legendary, and with the agility buffs, can survive trying circumstances as the need arises. A ranger's true versatility comes to the fore when teams are on the move through unfamiliar terrain.

I stepped back and thought to myself how little the words actually told me. I was more than convinced that I was taking part in a role-playing scenario, an RPG or Role-playing computer game of sorts. I was being afforded the option to choose a "Class" that would define my lifestyle and abilities within these simulations. Ranger definitely appealed to me. It was one of my favorite classes when playing RPG's. Sure I was in my early fifties and had spent a lot of time in the military, but with 5 years of retirement under my belt, I had had a lot of time to catch up with all the iconic games. This was more enjoyable territory than the swamp or desert scenes I had just experienced. Despite my circumstances, despite my internal struggle with being a captive, this fed some deep inner desire to define myself better, to know that fixed actions had fixed consequences defined by fixed laws. The scenarios I had been in though, were anything but fixed and seemed to be as real as if I was back on Earth, thrust into weird places and asked to survive for some reward at the end of the trial.

I stepped to the next statue of myself. This one appeared more buff, more muscled than what I knew myself to be. I read the title.

## WARRIOR

A warrior's lot is to fight and protect his companions. The warrior needs to further develop skills in strength, agility, and stamina. At certain levels, a wise or intelligent warrior gets to broaden his horizons into other disciplines. Warriors need to be stubborn, protective, arrogant and brutish. They need to dominate their foes in every way. A person who gets the job done will thrive as a warrior class.

Moving away, I went to the next statue in line. There were four more figures, and I wanted to see all that was on offer before I committed to any one of them. The next statue was an imposing effigy of me. It had a

distinguished dark robe and a staff not dissimilar to the one I had been using regularly through these last simulations.

## MAGE

A mage is a wise choice for an intelligent and experienced participant. Skills required for a mage to be successful include wisdom, intelligence, and stamina. The level of control and abilities can be combined with further options, provided the correct attributes are acquired. A mage is a powerful force that has as much to do with formulating team strategy as they do with implementing that strategy through the use of magic. The magical arts are wide and varied, and further specialization is required before a master magician title can be achieved. Remember, a well-placed spell at the right time can change the course of a battle.

Rubbing my chin in thought, I wondered what the magical arts entailed? Did it have the fireball stuff of legends and games or was it more esoteric, using psychic energies to manipulate minds and perceptions? I also wondered if it encompassed healing.

Moving on to the next effigy, I saw the appearance was almost the same as the mage, except that the robe was more rustic, like a bathrobe from a cheap hotel. Course and rustic. The hairstyle was almost monkish in nature.

## HEALER

A healer requires agility, stamina, and intelligence. The healing of wounded comrades at crucial times can make all the difference when facing adversity. Reaching those fallen comrades safely is equally important. Challenges are impossible without the support and dedication of a healer. If you are the type of person who loves to be needed, who craves deference and respect. The type of person who does things for others simply to help them, then the Medicinal Arcanum is for you.

This choice seemed appealing. Knowing how to heal others and yourself is crucial in any battle. I knew that first-hand. The summary hinted at arcane arts so probably this included magical abilities. I wondered how

much crossover there was and if it was possible to develop offensive capabilities beyond the obvious supportive role. I knew in the modern military that medics in the Special Forces were some of the coolest customers in a pinch. They kept their cool when everything around them was going to hell. They usually had to do it while under fire.

Moving on, I found the next class, which immediately caught my interest. With all the hints that these Sims would include battle, challenges and so on, I thought to myself that this would probably be the one that had the most benefits for both myself and any team.

### ASSASSIN

The Assassin class is both a blessing and a boon. Skills required include agility, stamina, and intelligence. Further skill trees required include stealth and alchemy. The assassin infiltrates areas using stealth and guile. As the name suggests, their main purpose is to kill. Assassins are experts in hand-to-hand combat as well as armed combat. They can adapt to use anything as a weapon. This class will be available only if you have the required innate basic skill-set. Can your conscience combine with an assassin's duties?

Arriving at the last statue, I noticed it was the most obscure. It was an ever-changing cascade of different styles, body shapes and poses. Different handheld weapons appeared and disappeared. It seemed to be fluid with even the physique of the effigy swelling and diminishing as the figure changed from a wiry build to bulked. I read the highlighted text.

### PRODIGY

A prodigy is a well-rounded individual with a broad range of skills extending across all the main classes. A prodigy class requires a prodigy intellect and a desire to be the best of the best at everything. A prodigy defines how their respective skills and attributes are used to best effect. This class will be available only if you have the required innate basic Abilities. Are you such a talented individual?



I paused after reading this. This was the one I REALLY wanted. It left me a lot of room to grow into my natural abilities, but it worried me because it seemed to hint that my abilities would need to be well rounded throughout.

Thinking about my past military lifestyle and how it had prepared me for just such a class, It may have been lacking in some aspects of skill craft though, so I would probably have to grind those particular skills to make up for the shortfall in those areas. Without the direct list of abilities listed under each class, gave me no idea what I was getting myself into. As exciting as the option was, I was also a little intimidated by it.

I walked back to the small pillar where I had started. Grabbing the recess in the top of the pillar, my hand melded with it as if made for it. Before me, more text appeared along with a voice prompt.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 1.
You have 2 points to distribute.
Congratulations! You have achieved level 2.
You have 2 points to distribute.
Congratulations! You have achieved level 3.
You have 2 points to distribute.
Congratulations! You have achieved level 4.
You have 2 points to distribute.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 5.
You have 2 points to distribute.
Additional 3 bonus points to distribute.
Total Ability points: 16

Would you like to edit your Character sheet?
Y/N

I selected the “Y” and before me appeared a typical character sheet. It could have been for any of those RPG games I had played over the years. A 3D representation of myself, lifelike and in all my naked glory portrayed on one side of the screen view. It was odd to see myself twirling on a pedestal. Usually you get to choose your own avatar from a wide selection, but in this case, I was really me, and I couldn’t change it, I guessed a blue mohawk and tribal tattoos were out of the question. On the left was a list of abilities:

Abilities	
Strength	14
Agility	14
Intelligence	17
Wisdom	17
Stamina	14
Luck	13
Constitution	15

I immediately wondered where the numbers would fit in the grand scale of things and what the highest number could be. After all, what this was telling me is how my real life abilities scaled.

My next leap of intuition was if I added to these numbers with the attributable points, would it make any difference in reality or would the added on benefits only be found within the simulation? Definitely, a point to ponder and something to ask Grant whenever I had some one-on-one time with my handler.

I looked closely at each ability, which seemed to glow slightly as my gaze flicked over the text. If I focussed closely however, a small descriptive pop-up box appeared.

### STRENGTH

Strength is a direct measure of your ability to manipulate items physically in the world. The higher the number, the bigger the mass you can manipulate with ease based on your core physical and mental strength. At level 1, the average Strength is 9.

### AGILITY

Agility is a direct measure of your ability to manipulate your bodies' dexterity, suppleness, and reflexes. The higher the number, the more responsive your body is to observing your bodies' commands. At level 1, the average Dexterity is 7.

### INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence is a direct measure of your ability to process situations accurately and deduct a reasonable response quickly. The higher the number, the faster your response times. Instinctive fight-or-flight responses are also factored in. At high numbers, the quicker you arrive at a cognitive solution. At level 1, the average Intelligence is 12.

### WISDOM

Wisdom is a direct measure of your experiences and your ability to draw on those experiences to further your internal reasoning and subsequent external solutions. Age is often considered a direct correlation to wisdom, but not in every case. The higher the number,

the more options you have to any solution. This ability also adds to a deeper understanding of one's limitations and capabilities. At level 1, the average Wisdom is 8.

## STAMINA

Stamina is a direct measure of your endurance at rest and under duress, combined with your recovery time. It also factors in your overall ability to withstand external and internal damage. Stamina has a direct link to Hit Points and should never be neglected when compiling your overall character. At level 1, the average Stamina is 14.

## LUCK

Luck is determined by how often you make choices that work out for the best. If you are a lucky individual, then more often than not, your actions will align with the overall goal to achieve success. Luck, while random, tends to aligning when you least expect. At level 1, the average Luck is 10.

## CONSTITUTION

Constitution is a direct measure of your overall health and conditioning while at rest and ability to withstand hardship under duress, combined with your ability to heal. It also factors in your overall ability to withstand detrimental stimuli. Constitution has a direct link to Health Points. At level 1, the average Constitution is 12.

There were some other attributes like species, I looked at the text with intent.

Species: Human (Male), (Homo sapiens).

The human species is found on Earth, the third planet from the

sun in the Sol solar system. Sol is in the Orion belt in the Omega plane of existence.

Humanity is considered one of the most adaptable soft-bodied biotic species, with prolific breeding habits and an above average intellect. Intuition and a thirst for knowledge are some of humankind's main driving forces. They are also renowned as one of the most aggressive sapient species ever encountered. While under observation, they have consistently been at war with one another. The observation period has extended 5000 Sol Earth years. It is expected that when Humans make first contact, they will be aggressive rather than defensive.

Now that was very interesting. We had been under observation by the Absinthe for a very long time indeed. It was also alarming, a bit like discovering a peeping tom had been watching you shower your whole life. It also meant that they had avoided observation themselves, which corroborated how advanced their tech was. Another point that caught my eye was the part about plane of existence. Mathematicians had long theorized the existence of alternate planes, but our physicists had yet to prove it conclusively.

I was getting off track. Looking at the points I had to invest in my character creation.

I immediately went for luck. Being lucky was one of the main reasons I had made it this far and I would not let that attribute slide. I notched it up to 15.

A bright golden aura suffused the avatar, and a chime went off for each point. Next, I decided on strength. In almost any scenario I could think of, strength came in handy. It would have to go up.

I notched it up to 17. As I did so, I felt a wave of warmth suffuse my body at the first chime, and then a terrible pain bent me over as the next two chimes dinged. Every, and I mean EVERY muscle and bone in my body was suddenly screaming at me in protest. I was pouring with sweat and could barely stand. The burning intensified and seemed to suffuse my entire being. Something akin to being immersed in lava. I thought it must be the snakebite venom affecting me. Perhaps the health potion I had imbibed had worn off.

My hand was still locked to the console though and regaining my composure I looked at my Avatar. From sleek, trim and slightly flabby around the stomach, my body had developed muscles. I gaped. The avatar looked formidable. I looked down at myself and saw my ripped muscles bulging like coiled vipers beneath my skin. Wow! I mean just wow; I had my six-pack back. In fact, it looked like an eight-pack. The layer of flab I had gained in my retirement had vanished as if burned away. If I could get this machine back to Earth, I could make a fortune in the slimming industry.

With the amount of pain I had just felt, I guessed that my real live body had undergone this same transformation. It answered one of the questions I pondered earlier. The simulation required live guinea pigs to work on. With every answer came more questions. I continued.

Next was Agility. I wasn't looking forward to this. Have you ever joined a yoga class and then had the instructor decide you were not stretching enough? They always took you to the next level of pain and suppleness. Cringing I added 1 point to Agility. Again I felt warmth suffuse my body, but fortunately no pain. Relaxing I quickly added two more points. Then it hit me. I spasmed in absolute agony.

The pain shot into my hamstrings, up my back, along my arms. I felt myself contort every which way, but no matter what I did, the pain would not relent. Falling to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut, my one arm still stuck on the pillar console. It felt like I was being eaten alive by piranha fish. Thrashing back and forth, I longed for a way to make it stop. I even tried reverting the points back but to no avail. I knew it was going to be bad; I should have listened to my intuition. At last, I blacked out.

A gentle chime reverberated through my skull, waking me from the nightmarish dream I had been having. Something to do with being stuck between two bells that tolled and then swung apart to stretch me. The reality wasn't much better.

A machine voice in my head said, "Corrective reconstructive surgery complete. Agility levels are within defined parameters."

The pain had subsided, and I gathered my feet. Standing was much easier, and if I was honest with myself, I felt great. Like when you go for a massage, and while the whole process is painful, you walk out feeling like a million bucks. I had always wondered if the feeling of relief from such massages wasn't because they had stopped kneading out all your stiff

muscles. The euphoria a simple result of no more pain. Ah, whom was I kidding? I looked at myself and smiled. I was in my early fifties age-wise, and yet my Avatar looked like I had lost 20 years. Sure, the wrinkles were still around my eyes as I smiled, but damn I was looking and feeling wonderful. It seemed there were some perks being abducted by aliens.

I moved on to the next attribute and balked. Intelligence was innate. It wasn't something that one could change with the press of a button, was it? Would my brain grow, my head expanding with it? Would I have an AI installed? I didn't want to mess with my brain the way they had messed with my body. Did I?

With a mental sigh and a steeling of my resolve, I added one point to Intelligence.

Again a sparkling aura suffused my avatar, but I felt nothing untoward happen to my body.

Breathing out with relief, I moved on to Wisdom and added one here too. With them both at 18, I was fairly sure I was giving myself enough of an advantage to qualify to learn any of the skills the simulation provided.

I had 7 points left to distribute and the two remaining skills were Stamina and Constitution. If I bumped Stamina up to 18 and Constitution to the same, then I would have a well-rounded character. Since I was level 5 now, I expected the scenarios would get decidedly harder and I would need lots of life points to keep myself alive. The stamina gains would also contribute to that.

It was amazing how immersive this was. If I took a moment to gather my thoughts, I was being plugged into a system and asked to survive. Like being thrown in the deep end of a pool to sink or swim. I wasn't sure why yet, but the clues were adding up.

I was still hesitant though. What if I amped my intelligence and wisdom to a full 20? Wouldn't that be a huge advantage? Especially if I needed to use things like magic as had been hinted at with those effigy classes. I instinctively knew that I had to choose one of them once I had completed this phase.

With these thoughts in mind, I amped the intelligence and wisdom to 19 each.

Again the aura suffused my avatar but this time I felt a sweep of vertigo. No pain fortunately and I left it at that.

The last two abilities would be painful; I knew it. I hesitated at first and then thought to hell with it. What's the point in stalling when you only have one choice? I adjusted Stamina to 17 and before the effects could hit me. I changed Constitution to 17

What happened next I cannot explain adequately with words. Even my actions failed to fully imbue the kaleidoscope of pain that racked me. I blacked out again and woke up a good while later with the same tone and prompting as before. "Reconstructive surgery complete. Constitution and Stamina levels are within defined parameters." It then listed what it had done to me.

Over the years, the life of a Special Forces soldier had left me many scars. I had also taken up smoking and a few other bad habits along the way for short but detrimental intervals. As it turns out; to have a Constitution and Stamina of 17 in this crazy Sim, required me to have a new liver, pancreas, small intestine, and lungs, both of my kidneys, several glands, including the prostate but fortunately not the family jewels. Add to that a new heart, spinal reinforcement (whatever that was), bone marrow enhancement for heavier and denser bones. The blood vessels and nerves were fortified and elasticized, which seemed superfluous and overkill to this whole experience. The lungs were also reinforced.

I glanced at the list and realized I had just had an entire body makeover WITHOUT anesthetic. The scars of my past however were still apparent.

I did a mental scream. Sadly, the scream was too late. They had done it already. How long I had been glued to the machine I had no idea. Then I realized this was just a projection in my mind. My real body was lying swollen and healing in some fancy whitewashed space ship room somewhere.

I looked at my avatar again. A magnificent male specimen looked back at me and I was quite pleased if I was honest with myself. I doubted I ever looked so good.

A prompt appeared as my hand came loose from the console.

Select your Character class.
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The final word 'class' was highlighted so when I looked at it with intent, it



opened up more of an explanation:

Character Class is the title you will embrace. It will become the embodiment of your abilities. Every class has benefits for the team. However, we expect you to select the best class suitable for you, not for any perceived team. Teams will be made up of needed classes from the talent pool for specific situations.
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Embrace your true self and prevail!
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With a final chime that made me wince, I stepped to the effigies. I knew which one I wanted and so made straight for the shifting form of the Prodigy.

As I passed each effigy, it brightened as if beckoning me. I ignored them and continued to the one and only Prodigy statue. This time as I approached it, a prompt appeared.

You qualify for the Prodigy Class. Is this your final choice?
---

(Please note that due to your unusually high and balanced level of Abilities, you may be flooded with skills previously unknown. It is recommended that you take time to become acquainted with them before attempting them. They are dangerous and while some can be beneficial to those around you, some will undoubtedly harm. You have been warned!)
--

Y/N
-----

I realized inwardly that since I had upped my intelligence and wisdom, that the prompts were providing much more information than usual. It was a good thing. Bracing myself I selected Y.

The most amazing thing happened. My body became rigid and a glowing golden light emitted from my fingertips on my left hand. Like pixie dust it sprinkled towards the effigy. Startled, I realized where the dust left my hand that my hand no longer existed. Freaked out, I watched as the dust I was becoming diffused from me into the effigy. I was becoming the statue.

I was... well, this was another one of those experiences best left to the imagination.

I felt insubstantial and yet more solid than ever before. It took moments and lifetimes until my view switched over and I was looking at the last of myself dissolve to become me. I stepped from the statue's pedestal, leaving it empty behind me. I was still buck-naked except for the loincloth which fortunately had transitioned with me. I had become the ever-changing statue of the Prodigy.

A new prompt appeared as a voice read the words into my mind.

You have embraced the way of the Prodigy. It is not an easy path, but with your abilities, you have every chance of success. You are the third Prodigy to exist. Make wise choices, make balanced choices, and you will prevail!"

With a final chime, it released me with a bright flash.

# CHAPTER 7

## BROTHER'S IN ARMS

When my spotted vision came back into focus, I was standing, hand outstretched to the beacon rock. I was back in swampland. The other members were all sitting off to one side around a campfire and something was cooking on a spit. It smelled so delicious I could immediately feel saliva pool in my mouth. Sarah was sitting with the group and she noticed that I was back. Calling out she waved, "Hey, Colonel Armpit! You're back!"

I grimaced inwardly. She had called me using my nickname. I preferred to introduce myself without military attachments.

"Wow!" she exclaimed as I turned and walked towards them. Grinning, I nodded. It was hard to exude a commanding presence in just a loincloth, but with my new makeover, I felt like I was on cloud nine. My body had a new lease on life. I was the all-new me.

"Petros Arkansas" I stated, walking up to the burley hairy fellow who had called himself Stone McGee, hand outstretched for a handshake. The man stood up smiling. His body was very hairy, almost carpet-like across his chest. His face covered in a full beard. He returned my grip. Strong and sure. I then turned to the others, repeating myself as each one shook hands and told me their names. Sarah was hovering along with me and we all sat down around the campfire.

"That roasting meat sure smells good. What is it?" I opened, not sure where to join in the conversation.

Charlie, a brusk Texan with a build like Sylvester Stallone said, "This here be one of them dang flat dawgs," his Texan accent was just a little too much, but then having known a few Texans, it was probably just about right.

"We can eat the alligators?" I enquired

"Sure can, and they tastes just like chicken!" The group chuckled at that, "Here try some." Using two sticks fashioned for the purpose, he gave

me a piece from the roasting carcass. My hunger was all-consuming and not being a squeamish eater I jumped in.

It tasted like crisp, succulent chicken. Not too raw and not too dry. Perfect. It left me salivating for more. By this time he had gathered a few more choice pieces of the roasting meat and placed them on some dried bark used as a plate.

I continued to consume, while the others picked up their respective plates and we all chowed down on what turned out to be a medium size alligator. Irony? Perhaps, but then I was finding a lot of things with this situation ironic.

When I finally looked up, licking my lips and fingers, John Stiles enquired in a typical New York accent, "Where are you from Colonel?" He was a slender wiry-looking man, taller than average with dark thoughtful eyes. Looking at him I could see him sizing me up as us military types are wont to do. In fact, all of them gave me that impression and I could feel a deep-seated camaraderie that only exists between men and women who have fought, prevailed and bonded in the Armed Forces.

"Please, just call me Petros, my military days are behind me," I stated. It was a long-practiced lie because once you were a military man, your deeds followed you forever. Especially in your nightmares. It came to me then, that actually, I was no longer retired.

Hugo Eriksson, a blonde haired, blue-eyed hulk of a man, easily two meters tall said in his clipped Nordic accent, "You may have been retired before the abduction, but now you are very much reenlisted."

This brought out snickers from most of the group and a huge booming laugh from Hugo. He seemed to be a man who did things in wholes, not halves.

"Are you Dutch?" he enquired of me. This brought out a laugh from Sarah, who then gave them the same clue I had given her.

"Where he comes from, they call hurricanes cyclones and there is lots of gold."

"Eldorado?" Answered Raúl Sánchez, the only Hispanic of the group. He was a stocky shorter man, quite a lot shorter than myself. He had a solid soldier's bearing and a well-defined body, dark eyes and one of those grins that were infectious.

This caused Hugo to choke and then unable to contain his mirth, bellowed out in great booming bouts of laughter.

When someone puts that much effort into laughing, you can't help but crack a smile, and from there it doesn't take long to widen that grin until you are laughing too. I immediately felt in sync with these guys. Even Sarah's laughter could be heard trilling amongst the bass of all us testosterone-bearing thugs.

What followed was one of the best experiences I had had in a long while. It was a simple thing, chatting around a fire, small talk, but it allayed our fears. We were all victims. This simulation gave us a chance to forget about that and focus on being human.

At last, I poked the big white elephant in the room. "So what are we doing here?" I addressed the question to Stone McGee, whom it turns out was an ex-Special Air Service operator with the rank of Major. He seemed in charge of the group. He was also the ranking officer other than myself.

"Colonel, we are a special team gathered by the aliens. Our purpose here is to familiarize you with your new situation and bring you on board as a fully committed member. There were three other candidates, but of the five, only you two made it. From what I've heard from the lass over there," he indicated Sarah with a thrust of his jaw and a tilt of his expression. His whiskers still dripping with the grease from the meal. I had to look away, the impulse to ask him to wipe his mouth strong on my mind.

As if reading my thoughts, he used his forearm to wipe his mouth and smiled. "I have to teach you about how to access your skills, how to improve them and what you need to do to get ahead. Make no mistake, Colonel. Our situation is tenuous. It requires us to be successful. You were not chosen at random. Each member of the ASS service is someone who won't be missed, who..."

"The what service?" I interjected

"Yeh, we call ourselves the ASS Service. For Abductee's Special Service." He cracked a grin through the carpet of hair on his face and continued with practiced ease, "We try to take ourselves seriously, but in training, we get to let our hair down, besides with all the riff-raff from different international services, what else could we be called?" He looked up with a mischievous twinkle as he waited for the cat calls from all the various members. They didn't disappoint.

"Okay, okay, I take it back. Not everyone has the pedigree of the SAS. It is what it is. I had no part in naming it, but someone did and it has stuck, so

there ye have it.”

Turning back to me he continued, “You are now in a simulation we call Nico Sim. Short for Nicaragua Simulation. It’s not an exact replica of the place and has elements of Florida and most of Central America. Especially in terms of flora and fauna. But getting back to what I was saying, you won’t be missed back home, most likely you have no living relatives and you have an exemplarily military record.

The aliens who have us are an ancient race, who, because of their advanced tech, have lost the physical attributes needed to adequately defend themselves or others. Instead, they train us to do that job for them. They seem to select experienced military personnel only, and inject them with nanobot tech to enhance their abilities to super soldier status. Although we have seen a few younger guys come through with various other talents like computer programming, engineering, and physics, but they don’t advance the same sorts of skills as we do, or in the same way. It all depends on how you use the skills as to how you will advance. It’s all very mumbo jumbo tech stuff, but cutting edge.” He nodded sagely at this very mundane description of our situation.

I had some questions but before I could interject again Major Stone lifted his hand to stall me and continued.

“You are most likely between level 1 and 5, although judging by the length of time you were attached to the beacon and the condition your body is in after, I assume you hit level 5 and got to select your Class. As we are all above level 50, we have been through the drill more times than we care to remember. The pain from enhancements the first time though is really quite an experience. Now, before you ask questions, I want to finish what I have to say to you.”

“Each Class is specific for each individual. The Absinthe, um, you know the aliens who have us are called the Absinthe?” I nodded. He continued, “Well, in case you're wondering, it’s Hugo’s favorite alcoholic beverage. He kept asking for Absinthe when they caught him, he was suffering from a hangover and wanted more hair of the dog. The aliens took him literally and thought he was calling them Absinthe. Somehow the name stuck and they call themselves that now so we have something easy to remember. If you want their real name, you will have to ask your alien who controls you.”

“How many of us are there?” I blurted the question while he took a breath.

“Honestly, I have no idea, perhaps a few hundred, no more than a thousand on our ship, but since I reached level 50, I have been working with these ugly mugs exclusively.

Sadly, we lost some people from our unit a few weeks ago, and all the mages have already been assigned to other teams. So we are here helping you newbies get acquainted hoping to snag us a mage or two to strengthen our unit.”

“But I thought we can’t die in these Sims? What happened to your men?” I asked.

“Well, now that’s a great question Colonel, and the truth is you can’t really die in these Sims, well you die here, but not in reality. However, you won’t always be performing in these Sims. When you reach level 40, you will go on real life missions, and at level 50, they will assign you a regular team. With the scarcity of mages, those mage classes will most likely get assigned even earlier in their progress.”

“I see,” I replied, not really seeing at all. “Then what exactly do they mean about mages? I mean on Earth, magic is just a myth.”

“Yeah, you will discover that to be false. The Sims you will have to overcome to get you to level 40 will make magic a critical part of your life. Are you a mage?”

My internal reluctance to share information struck to the fore, I wasn’t sure I wanted to say too much about the skill class I had chosen, especially as I didn’t understand exactly what I had gotten myself into. None of these guys seemed to be the type who played computer games, but then you never knew. As a Prodigy, though I should be able to perform magic, in fact, I had specifically chosen it so I could. That was before his big reveal that this was much more than a Simulation to entertain the aliens. Besides, humans couldn’t perform magic; it was as simple as that. At least not in the real world.

“Aye, I can see you are the cagey sort Colonel but don’t worry, we are all friends here. You will change your song in time. I am a Ranger Mage, not so skilled in magic as I would like, but I have enough to get by creating shields and such. A fair bit of Druid magic and Air magic. You probably don’t believe in it yet, but you will. The Absinthe have found a way to unlock the potential in certain individuals, allowing them to manipulate

matter. A kind of psychic awareness and ability. It allows the gifted to manifest thought and willpower into reality. We have learned to not only manipulate matter with our minds but to develop an affinity to the different arenas of magic. We cannot teach each other, but if you have innate abilities, they will manifest during your training and access to spell books. Dinna fash yirsel.”

Sarah, who had been sitting next to me clinging on to every word during the conversation, asked: “What was the last part?”

McGee laughed. “Sorry lass, sometimes I slip back into Scottish. It means ‘don’t you worry’.”

I turned to Sarah and asked, “What class did you choose?” Shrugging her shoulders she said, “I didn’t get to choose a class, I was only bumped up to level 3. I spent 4 of my points on Luck. I am now on 12 Luck points, then I put one point on strength and one on intelligence. So hopefully with my next training Sim, I can get to level 5. Major McGee was telling me that people usually reach level 5 after four Sims and in exceptional circumstances three sims. He said that I could probably reach it on my next Sim because we had met up and worked together to complete this one. He said that people seldom reach this point in Nico Sim on their first try, if ever. So I got rewarded a lot of points for it.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we saw one of those other guys trying to reach the island by swimming. He got eaten. Wasn’t pretty.” John chimed in, “That will be a regular occurrence in all of your training. Each death leaves a scar though. You want to avoid them as much as possible. The human psyche gets twisted if you go through too many deaths. Creating a false sense of bravado and making you forget you will be part of a team. If you die too many times, there is a good chance the Absinthe will discard you as unsuitable.”

“They do that?” I asked. “Man! These aliens sure have a lot of autonomy to fuck with us. Doesn’t it rankle you we are essentially their slaves?”

“Better stow that talk, Colonel,” Raúl spoke from across the fire. “The Absinthe don’t appreciate their pets getting rebellious. We are here to follow orders and take out the trash for the good of all species. In time, you learn that. Hooyah!”

Sarah blurted out “Sempre Fi” as Marine personnel were wont to do, and they both grinned at each other.



“Raúl, are you a navy puke too? Let me guess, SEAL’s?” I asked knowingly.

“That’s right, Colonel, and in this place, I’m an Assassin. What they call a Dark Assassin and let me tell you it’s got some serious perks.”

From his hand a misty dark substance streamed out all around him, enveloping him and suddenly just like that he was gone. I could see where he had been sitting just moments ago, but right before my eyes, the guy had just disappeared.

It startled both Sarah and me and even more so when his voice whispered into my ear a moment later. “How do you like that?”

Well, without thinking my reflexes kicked in. I had years of self-defence training, and my now perfect body responded. From my sitting position, I straightened to stand, then my hips thrust up and back, my hands groped for where his voice had been and I threw him judo style right over my head directly onto the firepit full of simmering coals, the remnants of the meal we had cooked went flying in every direction.

He was slightly intangible, but I had grabbed a handful of his hair while I executed the move. When he crashed down onto the burning embers, he became tangible once more. Using his hair, I dragged him off the hot coals as he screamed in pain, his mouth letting forth a stream of Latino expletives that would make a sailor blush.

Everyone else around the fire stood up. It all happened so fast that no one did more than that.

“Christ!” blurted Stone. Rushing forward to check on Raúl, who was howling like a madman, trying to dislodge the burning embers from his posterior. The smell of burned flesh pervaded the clearing.

I was standing poised, ready to face anything, my adrenaline spiking through the roof. Sarah backed away from me. John, on the other side of the fire, retrieved his makeshift spear and cocked his arm for a throw. Hugo, on the other hand, reacted the least. He did have a surprised expression on his face, which then became thoughtful, and without warning turned to crinkled amusement. His hearty bellow of laughter soon followed. This broke the spell.

John lowered his weapon and looking at Raúl, his lips twitched into a wry smile.

Still amped, still full of adrenaline, I shouted, “What the fuck, man! How did you do that? Why did you do that?”

Stone, began helping Raúl dislodge the burning debris still searing his rump. He brought out the gourd with the healing potion and Raúl sucked on it like it was the last drink on earth. Turning to me, he gasped. “Manno! You are fast! that was a good response, but did you have to throw me into the fire?”

Charlie, who had been out on watch came storming into the clearing. His expression expecting trouble. “What the hell happened!” he blurted. Stone said soothingly “Don’t worry about it Charlie, our vigorous SEAL here tried to give the Colonel a scare and it ‘backfired’. Mightily!” He then roared with laughter perhaps finding more amusement in his pun than the actual event.

Hugo was still gasping and spluttering with laughter, and with Stones play on words, went up for more. His face was pulsing red as he struggled to take in a breath. I thought the Norwegian was about to have a stroke.

Charlie looked down, puzzled at Raúl’s sizzled rear. The smokey remains of his loincloth still smoldering.

Raúl said, “Don’t ask, just know that the Colonel has got some moves.” He came over to me hand thrust out. “No hard feelings, man. I was just showing off.” I clasped his hand, then changed to a forearm grip.

“Hooyah!” I said, and we both grinned.

Once things had settled down again, we retook our places and Stone continued. “Well, you have seen how magic works here. We all have a fair number of tricks for our respective classes, but none of us is as powerful as a dedicated, talented mage. We really need those when we are sent up against the enemy. The enemy have all kinds of advantages, but they have little to no defense against powerful magic, but I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“So I’ve told you the why, but I haven’t told you the how yet, so let’s get to it.” Stone continued, “First I need to explain to you how to operate your character sheet and adjust your skills. Please keep in mind that innate Abilities differ from Skills.”

“Abilities have a numerical value assigned to you specifically, based on who you were before. From this point on, you will receive skill points, depending on how much you use a skill while doing the various Sims.

These accrue and are influenced by your current Abilities, and similarly they contribute to your future capabilities.”

“You will have no guidance, hints, nor prompts other than perhaps sometimes a general objective. Sometimes you will work with others; sometimes you will work alone. Each Sim has a different flavor, a different focus. This one here, Nico Sim is all about survival. We also use Sims to practice before missions. This helps us to prepare for what we are likely to face.”

“The system bases rewards on surviving the challenge and reaching the objective within a certain timeframe. What you do along the way all contributes to your skills and to some degree abilities. Now you have reached level five, only your skills level up and accrue to your overall level, until level 25, where you can adjust your Core Abilities again, and then again at level 40. There are other points of advancement, but none of us has reached that level yet.”

“What Sims have you been to, or is this your first Sim like Sarah?”

“Well, I was in one other before this. It was a desert and got eaten by huge bark beetles, that was not a fun experience I can tell you.”

Stone chuckled. “Aye, those beetles definitely know how to tear a man apart. We call that Sahara Sim. That’s when magical abilities come to the fore. With magic you can levitate above the sand, or if you’ve the assassin’s skill-set, you can adjust your gait to move naturally so they don’t detect your presence. You can also be like Hugo over there, our mighty warrior. In his last outing in Sahara Sim, he found their queen and ripped her head off. At level 65, he has quite an advantage in terms of strength and power. He usually takes the brunt of enemy attacks and dishes it right back.”

“What about modern weapons?” I asked. “Rifles, mech-suits, tanks, and so on? Don’t we get to use any of that? It seems ridiculous that we are sitting here in loincloths using rudimentary caveman weapons. We are all accomplished soldiers and we are being retrograded.”

“Aye Laddie, don’t think like that. We have to make do with what we have so we don’t attract attention to Earth. If the aliens equip us with that

type of technology, we run the risk of being noticed. We have to keep a low profile. Also, our weapons won't function the same when not on Earth.

While the bullet may fire, as it has its own oxidizer within the casing, the atmosphere it is fired into may be denser or less dense than what we are used to and accuracy will be compromised, then there are the casings and the bullet heads themselves, which will leave telltale signs of our presence. According to the Absinthe, we have to remain anonymous. If we die or are captured, we must have no tech that the enemy can identify, no way to determine how advanced we are as a species. Our masters are the cagey sort, a bit like you, reluctant to share info and even more reluctant to let their underhanded schemes come to the light of day. Apparently, we are one of the few species that can use magic easily almost anywhere, and so that is what gives us the edge, and they force us to develop that edge in these Sims. Now, let's get on with training you. What Class did you choose?"

"I chose the Prodigy Class," I stated calmly. Not sure what the response would be.

"At last!" interrupted Hugo from across the fire pit, "That's good news, Mr. Petros Sir, we have never had a Prodigy in our team. Although when I started on this journey there was a Prodigy in charge of the team that introduced me to my role. He was an arsehole though. I hope you won't be like that."

His face had turned into a frown and I decided to deflect his thoughts. "How long have you been part of this Hugo?"

"That is a good question," he said in a thoughtful voice "Let me think... they took me in 1999, at that time I was 35 years old, a Rittmester, um, that's a Captain rank. I am a former member of FSK or Forsvarets Spesialkommando. It's a not so well known Special Forces unit for anti-terrorism in Norway. I was badly injured in an anti-terrorist operation, I lost a leg and was crippled and they retired me with distinction."

"The uselessness I felt during all those months in hospital, the empty platitudes from everyone, and the pity in their eyes, it was very... how to say nedslående... um, disheartening. Now in this place, I have everything I lost grown back and a lot more. It is all I live for. I am a WARRIOR!" He looked up at me, with determination in his expression. The cascade of information about his personal life was a revelation for me and judging by the surprised expressions of his teammates it was for them too. Choosing not to notice our reactions, a silence fell and Hugo became lost in his

memories while staring into the fire, then he looked up as if dismissing the past from his pondering thoughts and the big man smiled. “What year is it for you now?”

“It’s 2025, that means you are 60 years old. Although you definitely don’t look like it.”

“Ah,... Time here is difficult to measure. Sixty you say? Well, if this is a retirement plan, it’s definitely better than the alternative. What say you Petros Armpit? Are you a believer yet?”

“Just call me Colonel, Armpit or Petros, please. We are all friends here.” I said expansively. My hands and arms open in a gesture to incorporate those around the fire.

Everyone turned to me, their eyes masked, guarded as they looked at me, waiting for my reply to Hugo’s deeper question. *I realized this was the crux of the whole meeting. These ‘Operatives’ probably all had some equally stunning revelations about their previous lives, but those lives didn’t matter anymore. They had embraced the cause of our slave masters. Stockholm syndrome? Perhaps, but even more compelling for them was the training, the order, the system. It made them feel useful. In Hugo’s case, he had been superfluous and redundant. A pity case, with no hope of ever regaining his former glory. With the abduction, it had all changed. He was an ideal candidate for such a system.*

*Inwardly I sighed. They wanted me to commit. They wanted to see if I would join the cause. I had no way to know what would happen if I disagreed with this process, except that perhaps that was why they were here. To judge my usefulness to the cause, and perhaps to execute me if I didn’t meet the requirements?*

Keeping my calm demeanor, I nodded. “I believe in being useful, I have been rejuvenated and revitalized. For this alone, I am indebted. I will try my best to embrace this new way of life Hugo, but I can’t commit fully without understanding more. For example, who are the enemies of the Absinthe, are those enemies really Humankind’s enemies or are we just being forced into some war we should have no part of? So to answer your question, yes, I am a believer for now.”

Everyone visibly relaxed, and I felt like I had just passed a test. *So, I was right in assuming they were here as a control of some kind.* Relieved to have spoken my mind without repercussions, I turned to Stone with a receptive expression. He took the cue and continued.

“You have to learn how to access your skill log, which differs from your Character log. Now for me, as a Ranger Class, I was given very few skills to develop initially, and they were all skills I had already gained in the Regiment. I was just able to improve on them until new skills and sub-skills developed. They also gave me the opportunity to learn other skills from experience. So if you try something new, it registers and scores them. When I reached level 25, I was able to select the Mage class as a sub-class because my core Abilities met the new criteria.”

“They will give you points to rank up skills after each level is complete. Know this though, that each Sim will grant overall level points or experience points, but may or may not cause you to level up. It all depends on the results. Only when you level up and you meet the beacon at the end of a Sim will your points be assigned to your skills.”

“Much like the process you went through when you bonded with the beacon.”

“Okay, so how do I do it? I see all these boxes pop up in my vision when I give damage to creatures. How can I get rid of those? They really distract me.” I replied.

“The boxes are the first way we interface with the AI controller. It’s a simple way to relate to you, showing you what you are probably familiar with. There is a much more efficient way, but you have to will it to happen. Once you do that, it forms a Combat log, which you can reference during downtime. It also stops showing up while you are in combat, besides a blinking light, which you can arrange to any position that is comfortable for you. Now back to your Character sheet. To access it, you must close your eyes and visualize your Avatar.

When you do that, the Character interface will show up.”

I closed my eyes and did as Stone asked. Sure enough, in my vision was a familiar character sheet I recognized.

Continuing, Stone instructed, “Now look at the Character Attributes and make a mental command 'Skills'”

As I did so, the attributes blurred and a new list of skills appeared in their place. The list was long and extensive.

“Before you get into those,” said Stone, “Go back to attributes in the same way. Then visualize Magic.”

I did as he asked and my avatar disappeared, only to be replaced by a

pentagon type shape, within the pentagon was a spinning Yin-Yang sign. The pentagon had five sides and at each of the five edges a color, and as I focused on them individually, they each highlighted and a description box appeared with a short description embedded.

<b><i>Fire</i></b>
Fire is the essence of combustion. Consumption magic will spring from this font.
<b><i>Nature</i></b>
Nature is the essence of growth. Druid magic will spring from this font.
<b><i>Air</i></b>
Air is the essence of gases and weather and their manipulation. Air magic will spring from this font.
<b><i>Water</i></b>
Water is the essence of life. Aqua magic will spring from this font.
<b><i>Metal</i></b>
Metal is the essence of resilience. Power Magic will spring from this font.
Combinations of the above five elements will create unique results and subsequent sub-skills of magic.

I saw that the word 'Font' was highlighted in each notification. I activated the highlight.

Font

A font is a pool of Mana unique to each individual and is the measure of magic you can perform. Each incantation has a cost that will be deducted from your Mana pool until it is empty, at which point you can no longer access magical abilities. This pool of resources is available once activated during the class selection process. It will be adjusted based on usage, ability, intelligence, and wisdom. You can see your Mana pool bar below your health bar in your HUD (Head's up display).

I opened my eyes and asked Stone how to activate my HUD.

“Just will it in your view while your eyes are closed and it will always be available to see. It has several crucial notification options you can arrange as you like. Almost everything you can do is activated by thought alone. If you find you can't do something, ask your alien, and he will instruct you. If it has never been done before, he will endeavor to make it available.”

“And there you have it, Colonel. Everything you need to know to succeed in your next level. We have already given Lieutenant Wilson instructions so all that's left is to hear a little more about you, and we can all fade back out to our handlers.”

“Lieutenant Wilson?” I asked puzzled.

“He means me, Petros, I am Lieutenant Wilson,” said Sarah.

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# CHAPTER 8

## REFLECTION

“Ah right,” I replied, remembering she had told me before. “Well, my story is a little convoluted. But under the circumstances, I might as well share. Not that you giving me much choice in the matter.” I eyed them all accusatorially, but not a one looked down. This was part of the initiation so I accepted it with resignation.

“Basically, I was enlisted for National Service in the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the apartheid regime. I excelled at soldiering and after a short stint in the Parachute regiment, they selected me to do the Recce or Reconnaissance Commando course. If you don’t know about them, it’s not surprising. We were a highly specialized Spec-Ops unit. Based on the Grey Scouts and Selous Scouts of the Rhodesian war, but modernised. After completion, I sub-specialized in Small Team Insertion. When I left the SADF in 1994, it was due in part to a regime change and the subsequent questions that arose around what our teams actually did prior to the political shift.”

“I then signed up with the UK equivalent. Yes, Major Stone, I was part of the Regiment for six years. And yes, I had to qualify all over again. Fortunately, I was young enough to succeed and become a blade in the SAS Regiment after Sandhurst. I kept my rank of full Lieutenant but was given a new name because of the questions the previous government was asking. The witch-hunt was completely uncalled for. We just followed orders like everyone else.

I was later knocked up to Captain for my exemplary service in the Regiment. My specialization was Pathfinder, tracking, desert warfare, and bushcraft. I later became heavily involved in training and was seconded to our American friends across the pond to assist with their DELTA and SEAL Training. My focus still being desert warfare as a component of their Land Warfare Phase 3 qualification.”

“After two years of this, I made the move permanent and became a part time swabby. I enrolled for BUD/S under their foreign services enrollment

option. 'Why?' you might ask. Well if for nothing else, then to shut up the crowing from the SEAL trainees. I also wanted to see if I could do it. Many of those SEALs felt Hellweek was something every Spec-Ops should experience before they could be respected as an equal. I think I am still cleaning sand from my buttercrack after doing that."

I looked over at Raúl, who had a wry smile on his face. "I knew there was something I liked about you, Colonel," he stated.

Nodding at him, I continued, "Later I specialized in Counter-Intelligence, Anti-terrorism, and demolitions, including underwater demolitions which comes with the territory as a SEAL. I saw active service at first as a Major and then Lieutenant Colonel. The active duties included intelligence gathering, intelligence networking, and stuff I will not go into detail about. Working with the CIA, well... you get the picture. Most places I've been I have forgotten the name of. When I retired five years ago, they gave me the rank of a full bird to help with the retirement package benefits and they made me sign under the secrets act that I would never divulge anything classified as Secret from my active service."

"I have to say this though. I retired early because they wanted to pull me from the field and put me behind a desk. It wasn't for me. You miss the intrigue and being part of something bigger than yourself. Admittedly, when you get deep into your 40's, everything slows down, but you still miss being part of the active solution."

"Although, the way I feel now, I could double-time my way through the Fan Dance in my sleep. A bracing day out in the Becon Beacons."

This time it was Major Stone who smiled at me knowingly. The Becon Beacon Mountains and, in particular, Pen y Fan, is the highest of the Becon Beacon mountains in Wales, and is a substantial part of the grueling 24km SAS selection test. The memories of pain and endurance had tested me in ways I could never fully explain. Every SAS soldier considers that route a self-defining challenge, one of many, but definitely legendary.

"While I am one of only 118 men to complete both BUD/S and the SAS selection process, I am to date, the only one qualified for three different Special Forces, and now it appears I can add a fourth."

"Well, damn!" stated Sarah. "Was that so hard? I mean, why all the secrecy and hints at government secrets? I thought you must be like a mad nuclear scientist or Assassin or something."

I smiled ruefully at her "A lifetime of secrets, Black OPs, working with the

CIA, JSOC, MI5 and probably any other acronym you can think of has left me reluctant to share any real details, Sarah. This synopsis is just that. You can make of it what you wish.”

I turned to look at Stone. “Is that enough for you Major?”

“For now, yes,” he replied. “And that is that. Our job here is done. I will keep my eye out for you, Colonel Armpit. By the way, why are you called Armpit?”

I rolled my eyes and looked at Sarah. With much glee, she told them and the uproar of laughter brought Charlie back to the fire from his watch post.

“What’s with all the laughing?” he queried, “I’m supposed to be the joker in the pack. What’s going on here?”

This time Sarah asked him to say “Oom Piet”. His resultant Texan crucifixion of the Afrikaans language brought out howls of laughter.

Suddenly the team quieted and Major Stone had a blank gaze on his face. He then came back to himself and called his team. “We must get going, Colonel. You can stay here until nightfall until then you are free to roam the island. Try not to get killed if you stay here though. It will count badly towards your next level. When you are ready to leave, just touch the beacon and you will go back to your body. Good luck!”

With that the whole team made for the beacon rock, each touching it in turn and disappearing.

Left sitting with Sarah, I looked at her inquiringly. “Shall we head back? I’m eager to have some words with Grant.”

She agreed, and I let her go first. As she disappeared, I stepped back and surveyed the surrounding area. It was peaceful now, and I was finally alone with my thoughts.

I had not lied when I said I wanted to speak to Grant, but I figured some time to myself would be good. I walked a short distance until I was out of the foliage and could see the shore of the lake that circumvented the island. This line of sight also gave me a clear view of the sky and the sun. It warmed my face with its golden rays, and I had a hard time imagining this was just a simulation. The sun was fairly low on the horizon, so I probably had about two hours before dark.

I could see some shapes moving in the water, most likely alligators, but they hadn’t seen me and everything was as it should be. A sense of peace

pervaded me. I found a broken tree to sit on and just relaxed. The past few days and hours had been hectic. Everything I knew and loved was gone. At least everything materially. There would be no-one looking for me either. It made me realize how secluded I had become since leaving the army. Meeting this group had brought back so many memories. I couldn't deny that I missed it.

In my early days in Africa, I had spent long hours alone in the bush, just existing and learning to become one with it. Sure, it had been the sandy scrublands of the Kalahari desert or the sweeping grasslands of the Highveld, but I found I could feel at peace in any wilderness environment.

Once I found my heart at peace, feeling at one with the environment, secure in the knowledge I would detect any dissonance, I began to truly relax.

It was time I faced myself with some pertinent questions. This whole situation was quite an upheaval? Do I just give up my independence and embrace a new cause?

I had been embracing causes for the greater good my whole life. Everything used to be about the mission, about the result, no matter what the consequences were. Was it still like that? Did I have any patriotic bones left in my body that weren't broken or more appropriately shattered into disillusioned dust?

My life in South Africa during apartheid had been turbulent, bloody, and ruthless. Racial hatred was the worst of the worst in that war. I had known back in the late '80s that a biological weapon was being designed based on race.

At the time, as a young impressionable recruit, I had embraced the war, knowing only terrorists or 'Commies' as my enemy. Many of the unit were not racist in the least and not in this war against "blacks" but were instead, seeing this war as a fight against the communists, against Russian and Chinese indoctrination and influence of those times.

As the war in Southern Africa progressed, I saw many forms of evil of the worst kind. Inserted deep behind enemy lines, our small four man team operatives had found both kindness and cruelty, and many eye-opening revelations that weren't available for the average soldier.

Witnessing the enemy torturing each other using force of strength when persuasion wouldn't work. Killing collaborators using petrol and a car tire around their necks. The resulting carnage as the person clawed and

screamed and eventually died was a powerful tool used by the terrorists to enlist more recruits and force compliance, it even got the famous name of 'necklacing' and struck terror into the hearts of the civilian populace.

Many of the enemy were just poor people, overtaken by events. Press-ganged into taking up arms for something that didn't bother them at all. The political will of the time was not a movement of determined, educated and informed civilians, it was the press of an automatic weapon to a wife, a child or a parent. It was the promise of food during a drought. It was a lie that eventually had to be real because there wasn't anything else to justify what was being done.

My teams and I witnessed this, and I had sworn to myself that I would never ever believe anything ever told to me by any political party, ever. I swore an oath to myself to always check the facts and find out the details on my own.

My later days in the SAS I had seen active duty in Bosnia, the Ivory Coast, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Everywhere I went there was untold evil and cruelty, and I found it harder to believe I was part of the cure, part of something greater trying to quell the loss of innocent life. Especially since those paying in blood were usually the innocent.

Admittedly, some part of me definitely embraced the role of liberator, making sure those ruthless men and women paid the ultimate price for taking advantage of innocents they perceived of as weak. I was the guy who stood up and did the right thing, no matter if it cost my life.

Later, while working with the SEALs and Delta Force teams in counter-intelligence operations, I had always sought out evil with determined, controlled force. We had gathered intel on those slave traders, arms dealers and opium smugglers and crushed them wherever we could.

Often displaying the same ruthlessness that our enemies represented. I discolored the job was easier by being as evil as our enemies.

After some time, I realized that I... that we had become so much like the enemy we sought so ruthlessly. That epiphany had brought about my early retirement, not the threat of a desk, stateside, but I wasn't going to tell anyone that. It was hard to look in the mirror sometimes, convincing myself that the end justified the means. I had to get away from it all.

Once retired, once I stopped fighting and had a chance to really reflect on my life, and possibly the good I had done. I came to an understanding

that I had done everything for my team, and to survive. It had never really been about the grand political landscape. It had always narrowed down to that moment, when life and death were a sliver of thought to either side.

Now the Absinthe wanted me to take up arms for them. To train and fall into line as I had done so many times before. I didn't know if I had it in me. It wasn't the physical side. They had taken that out of the equation. Could I really face the responsibility of taking life in the name of something I didn't understand, didn't believe in?

These thoughts and conflicting emotions they stirred up didn't bring me any peace or resolution. Sighing, I acknowledged there was little choice for now and so I would continue to follow along until my chains were loosened. Then I would see how things stood. I was and always would be a man of action.

# CHAPTER 9

## “IT’S A KIND OF MAGIC”

Perched comfortably on the broken log, the setting sun warm against my face, I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and dispelled my tumultuous thoughts and willed my HUD to show in my vision.

Immediately, I saw a green bar along the top of my HUD showing my health at 100%. Directly below it was a purple bar, also at 100%. This I assumed was my Mana pool or Font. I willed it to the bottom of my vision. I now had the two bars within sight at all times. I thought about my combat log and a blinking cursor hovered over the bottom right of my view. I activated it and my Combat log appeared. I looked at the last entry:

You have damaged Dark Assassin Raúl Sánchez for 38 points of burning damage. I closed it with a thought, and willed my character sheet to show skills. The list was long.

<i><b>General Skills</b></i>	
Swimming	10
Fitness	7
Reactions	6
Climbing	8
Running	7
Balance.....	9

And so the list went on. I noticed almost all had scores between 6 to 10 with the highest being twelve for Improvisation. There were a few highlighted headings which opened submenus when I looked at them. I decided they were best left closed. Way too much information.

I could see why Major Stone had decided not to go through all these skills with me. It was a laborious list and there was a lot of crossover.



The one thing I noticed was that magical specialties were greyed out. Hinting that they would only show clearly once I had accomplished some magic.

After seeing Raúl's effortless vanishing act, I had little doubt we could do magic here, but I was more than a little skeptical that it was possible in real life. Could a simple brain adjustment really open a human's magical potential?

I decided to try something. Going to my Magical skills view, I looked again at the five different magical types. There was no clue how to use them, no button to press or gesture required.

So closing the sheet I instead willed it to happen. Breathing deep, calming my mind, I willed a fireball to issue forth from my palm and out into the distance. I felt... I felt something pull at me, like a gentle tug, and then I smelled something burning. I opened my eyes, to see the remains of my fireball landing in the reeds about 20 meters in front of me.

"Yes!" I shouted in exuberance. The excitement of my achievement too much to contain. I realized abstractly that perhaps my new body had more testosterone than I was ordinarily used to. I would have to check my emotions.

My HUD showed that only a fraction of the Mana bar had disappeared. This time I tried to do it with eyes wide open. Disappointingly, it was more like a sparkler than a fireball, but it was something. I kept at it. My frustration grew, it was a lot harder than I had anticipated.

Each cast was like a conflict of belief and logic. Logic dictated it couldn't be done, but if I believed it enough, if I allowed it to happen, then the sparkler fire flare happened. Almost subconsciously triggered. If I actively tried to fire, like take aim and pull the trigger, it felt like I was shooting a dud and nothing happened. I hoped that it wouldn't always be like this, but I was relatively happy that I had achieved some success.

By this time the sun was close to setting, and satisfied that my alone time had been productive, I went back to the beacon and touched it, willing myself back into my body.

# CHAPTER 10

## DETACHED LIMBO

I opened my eyes with a start and found myself back in the whitewashed room. I ached all over, but it was a healthy kind of ache, the type you get when you are healing. I realized that all the surgery had happened just a few hours ago, and I was most likely going to ache for a good while yet.

I tried to look around for Grant. I really had lots of questions, but he wasn't in sight and I was fixed again within this aspect of my reality. I reflected on the irony that my existence here was less real than the simulations. In fact, if I had a choice, I would much rather be in those free-roaming places than stuck here in detached limbo. I tried to call out for Grant, but all I got was a strange gurgling sound from my throat. Closing my eyes, I tried the mind communication he had insisted on when we first met. His reply was instant and my relief was a sore point I reminded myself not to feel. *Remember, he is your slave master, not your savior.* I scolded myself.

"Grant! It's good to speak with you," I crooned.

"I have always been here Petros. I have been waiting for your communication. We show you the way, and we expect you to be competent enough to figure out the details. What would you like to ask me? Although I must stress for you to be brief, I am involved in a crucial operation that requires my assistance and full concentration."

"Is that something to do with Major Stones' team?" I asked with a flash of insight, remembering Major Stone's blank expression before he hustled away with his team. It looked like he had received some kind of summons or notification.

"Major Gladstone and his team are involved, yes. I gather your time with him was fruitful?"

"Yes, quite fruitful as you put it. What I want to know Grant, is what can you tell me that will make my subsequent Sims more successful?"

“I also want to know how long I will take to heal fully and if the healing of my body will affect my abilities in the Sims?”

“These are tricky questions, Petros, as the answers will influence the results; However, I have noticed that you like to plan and be prepared. So let me answer the second question by saying the condition of your body and its healing will not affect your ability in the Sims, although you may find the brain surgery will take several days to complete and may cause you a few dizzy spells.”

“Brain surgery?” I exclaimed in alarm. “What do you mean brain surgery?”

“Well, considering you have increased your Intelligence and Wisdom and selected a unique and challenging Class, we found it necessary to activate parts of your brain that previously have lain dormant. It is not an invasive procedure, however, as we use nanobots to stimulate the neurons and create synthetic pathways within your brain. You won’t feel any pain from it, but your memory of past events will become more clear, thus allowing you to access that knowledge with ease. Additionally, the neurons and ganglia essential to learning and using what you call magic, need reinforcement, and extra stimulation. I will also give you a special sequence of mental exercises that will allow that part of your brain to function correctly. You may also get flashbacks of your past; This is normal and a direct response to the internal stimulation you are undergoing.

Now I must ask you to standby. I am needed elsewhere and we can discuss the rest of what you asked at a future time. I will now administer your nutrients and you may enjoy your dream state until then.”

And with that, he was gone. It was as if he had walked out of the room we had been conversing in. All these sensations were so unreal and yet so intuitive. I realized I was slowly getting the hang of it.

I heard the strange sound of the machine as it pumped in the liquid nirvana and I drifted off to sleep doing exactly as Grant had suggested.

This time, I dreamed of Africa.

Before me lay the vast open bushveld, the dry yellow grass was shifting in swishing waves with the gusting wind that brought the scent of coming rain. A low rumble could be heard in the clouds as distant thunder resonated across the landscape.

Out before me was a wide valley of familiar life. Umbrella-topped acacia trees interspersed across the landscape with outcroppings of shrubs and trees.

The unmistakable silhouettes of giraffe evident as they grazed from their tall lofty heights in the treetops. Small herds of elephant moved hurriedly towards the valleys meandering river for their daily mud bath, while, if you listened carefully the distant echoes of roaring lions stretched out across the plains. Their stated majesty over the land without question. Nervous antelope, buffalo, and zebra frolicked in great herds while they grazed restlessly, the coming rain making them frisky and temperamental.

Above in the roiling storm clouds, a lone African Fish Eagle called out its haunting cry as it glided effortlessly through turbulent winds. The higher pitch of its cry a perfect counter for all the other deeper bellows and brays below. It was a poignant memory of my teens. A place I went to often.

The Kruger national park was as big as some countries, a country of Africa's finest wildlife and a bastion for many endangered species. It was a memory I had forgotten in my mad dash through life. It was where I felt most at home and at peace in those early years. Connected.

As I stared out over the vista, the clouds rushed in. A violent interruption with lightning and thunder that cracked and sizzled. Blocking the suns glorious golden rays. The wind suddenly cold, blew stinging drops of rain onto the hungry, dry earth.

A few drops at first, then like a drum roll gaining momentum to an ear-splitting crescendo. The pregnant clouds bursting to bring new life to a parched land. I felt the drops hit me, the wind buffet me and the noises of cicadas, zebra, buffalo, and lions fade away. I could only hear the drumming of the drops onto the dirt, driving a deluge of changing fortunes onto the land of my birth.

Invigorated I wanted to run and be one with the storm.

Soaking wet now, the rain drenching me. I felt connected and separate all at the same time. It was a good memory. Wholesome and fulfilling.

I woke up feeling more refreshed than at any time I could remember. The feeling of bliss lasted until I found myself in my detached state in the white room. There was movement in the room and Grant seemed to be there. I just knew it.

"Grant?" I called out with my mind. "Are you there?"

“Yes Petros, I am here, I take it you mean am I here in the room with you. If you called out in that way, I would have been able to respond from anywhere in the ship. Your mental powers grow. We are excited to have one such as you as part of our team.”

“If that’s the case, why am I strapped up like this? I’m still your prisoner. “

“While you may not believe it, you are immobile for two reasons, the first reason is so that your new changes can adequately take affect without harming you, and the second reason is so that your new changes won’t harm us. We are not a physically dominant species and subduing you would take no small amount of effort. Besides, you still have to prove you are capable. That is what the training is all about.”

“Will you answer my question before you put me into the next Sim?” I asked.

A thoughtful pause occurred then Grant replied, “The next Sim will be challenging. More so than what you have experienced. It will still be an Earth-like environment, but a harsh one. I will expect you to survive and prevail.”

“You mean like the desert one? Sahara Sim? I had absolutely no chance in that one.”

“Quite,” replied Grant smugly. “That Sim was for humility more than anything else. That you killed several of the Beetle creatures was remarkable. We always arrange the first Sim so you experience the death and become grateful to survive. It is also a humbling prospect. Which reminds me, unfortunately, you have inadvertently interfered with Sarah’s experience. She was supposed to experience death in Nico Sim. You interrupted a defining moment in her training.”

“I see,” I replied as contritely as possible, but perhaps there was a small measure of smugness in my inner voice “I will try not to ruin any more of your plans.”

Grant seemed to laugh. It was the strangest feeling. I couldn't see his face. I couldn't even hear the reverberations in the air, but I got the distinct impression that his lips had curled into a smile. "You cannot hide your emotions well enough yet, and your thoughts bleed through. I have no doubt you are delighted to have, how to say, put a spanner in the works, but Oscar will rectify it. We are as much to blame as you are. Before you ask, the reason we do that first is to create humility, but also because it is something that leaves fewer scars when it happens so quickly. You become accustomed to the idea of it, if that is at all possible. Once accepting that death is not final in the Sims, you will push yourself beyond your comfort zones, secure in the knowledge you will survive. We have also found that delaying the experience causes unnecessary anxiety in the trainees."

"Regarding your progress though, it is uncommon that a human gets to level 5 without dying at least as many times."

"As I have remarked to others, you are unique and have achieved something rather unusual. My superiors are excited that you should continue and be qualified as soon as possible."

"Our recent forays have left us exposed and we need someone of your caliber out in the field."

"So you can't give me clothes, armor, weapons? I'm well trained with those. Why waste those talents?"

"Those talents are not wasted, and they may come in handy when you are fortunate enough to acquire such weapons, but we will never provide those. You will gain the skills to provide for yourself. Our situation forbids us to arm you so. It would cause a full-scale war to erupt between us and a formidable enemy. One, which we would lose against. Our abilities lie in equipping others to do our fighting for us; We do as much as we can to undermine our mutual enemies without direct confrontation. Now you must face your challenges. Survive for seven days or reach the beacon. Prepare yourself."

With that, he faded out of our mental connection and things got hazy.

Blinking a few times I tried to make out what was going on but realized the surrounding landscape was changing.

# CHAPTER 11

## SNOWCAPPED

Snow! Of all the scenarios I could have wanted, snow was not it. I hated the stuff. Cold, miserable and mysteriously fluffy, it coated everything as far as I could see.

Fir trees and rugged rocky cliffs extended around mountainous peaks. It looked like Grant had dropped me into the Rocky's. Perhaps this was Canada Sim. It wouldn't surprise me.

Breathing out, the fog of my breath billowed like a cloud. Each breath was invigorating and sharp as if I was chewing a handful of spearmint gum. I felt the numbing cold then, driven by the wind. It seeped into me, sucking out all my warmth. I looked down at my loincloth-clad body, gooseflesh already pervading my skin and knew this Sim would suck.

My first thought was to find shelter. Then assess any threats and deal with them as needed, then plan for extraction. I was to reach a beacon within seven day's time.

Sure enough, I looked for it and the flashing beacon was active on my internal compass. It seemed like I had to go over the mountains or around them to get to it. I moved towards some fir trees that were growing below a rocky ledge about half a click to my north.

The weather didn't look good and I would need that shelter sooner rather than later. The trees are a man's best friend in most environments, and I was counting this one no differently.

Once amongst the trees, I would look for an overhang and use the protective wall of the cliff face combined with the trees for shelter. Hopefully, it would act as a natural windbreak so I could warm up within the sheltered area and to top it off I could use the trees as a barrier against any snowfall. That is if I could break off some branches and prop them against that stonewall. It really sucked not having any tools. With that, I thought of my trusty staff and sure enough; it appeared in my hand.

Slightly startled, but considerably happier to have at least a weapon, I decided I had to move now that I had a plan. I couldn't just stand around

gawking.

It was not early in this world, and what little sun there was, was low on the horizon, blanketed by roiling oppressive clouds. Dressed or more aptly ‘undressed’ like this I would not last long in the cold. At night without fire and shelter, I had absolutely no chance at all.

I was used to snow, sleet, and cold; It had been part of living in the UK and definitely a part of winter in the US Midwest. Some fearsome blizzards had blown in and left me thankful for a fireplace and a thermally insulated house.

Now as I stood, practically naked, I was seeing the snow in a whole new light. It was soft and fluffy, sure, it even made that very particular crunching sound as your footsteps crushed it, but after my tenth step, I could no longer feel the snow scrunching up between my toes. It felt instead like I had two leaden weights at the end of my knees.

The rest of me could still feel, and what it felt was absolutely bloody freezing. Moving as I was, it was relatively good because it kept the blood-flow going, my elevated heart rate keeping my core body temperature stable, but with my extremities so in peril of becoming frozen stumps of man-cicle I had to think of some way to warm up.

Crouching down, I tried to warm myself up using magic.

With nothing else available and no other solutions at hand, I tried something I would never have thought possible a few weeks before. I imagined a warm barrier surrounding me. Well, in my haste I actually imagined one of my favorite comic book heroes, from the Fantastic Four; Johnny Storm’s solution, which was to ‘Flame on!’. As I thought this, pictured this, I felt the familiar sense of something draining from me and about a quarter of my mana bar in my HUD was depleted instantly. The results, however, were a lot more dramatic than I could ever have expected.

A blinding light of fearsome warmth washed over and through me and around me and flared out, then black spots swam before my eyes. When I could see clearly again, looking down, I saw I was standing on the bare wet ground and half a meter in every direction; the snow had melted. The cold, however, like a jealous girlfriend slammed right back into me as if to make up for a lost opportunity. I reasoned that this was not the way to do it. The “Flame on” routine not only drained me of Mana reserves, it just wasn’t practical for doing anything else besides burning intensely for a brief



instant. I definitely needed to learn control of this new and honestly exciting discovery.

With remarkable speed, I hurried onwards, slightly warmer but getting colder with each scrunching step. The 500 meters to the tree line became 300 meters and then 250 meters. By this time I must have been blue, well I felt blue, frigidly blue.

Gasping I stopped again, crouching down, trying to gather some warmth in me by rubbing my limbs, and I thought again about how to solve this. *I doubted Grant had put me here to die for humilities' sake. He wanted me to survive. How could I do this? From my crouched position I closed my eyes and thought of a way to stave off this frosty weather. Could I make a sparkler fireball and aim it at my legs? Okay, that was stupid. How could I do this without burning myself out and preserving my Mana pool?*

I realized that my Mana had increased a little, so my Mana regeneration was okay, but not great enough to do 'Flame on' every few minutes. *Could I do a lesser 'Fame on'? A kind of internal heat?* I began to think deeper and imagined warm blood flowing through my veins.

The pain that wracked through me would have bent me double if I wasn't already sitting on my haunches. My health bar began to drop dramatically, and I quickly stopped what I was doing. Grant's voice immediately resounded in my head.

"Petros, that is extremely dangerous, you don't have enough control nor understanding of your magical powers to use internal magics properly yet. You can cripple or kill yourself in reality by doing that. Refrain immediately or we will discontinue."

"Grant!" I cried out, "Aargh, that was insane, what did I do?"

"You attempted to use internal magic to increase your core temperature. The method was crude and unrestrained. You almost boiled your blood within your veins. At this stage of your training, do not invoke any internal magic. Do you understand?"

Gasping, and sweating profusely, I grunted out an affirmative, upon which Grant's presence faded and I was left alone with the cold, my beating heart, and a throbbing headache. Adding insult to injury, the sweat glistening all over my body was freezing. It must be minus 10 degrees

Celsius out here.

*If I couldn't use internal magic, as Grant had called it, it seemed obvious that I could instead use external magic. That meant I could make a fire beyond my body, but what else was magic good for? It dumbfounded me. How could I solve this?*

*Desperate times for desperate measures*, I decided that what I needed were some very warm clothes, a kind of barrier between me and the cold. *Wait, that's it! I had magic, how difficult would it be to create a barrier between myself and the cold? What type of magic was that? Could I even do it?* All these thoughts rushed through my brain, but the solution came to me in a flash of insight, and with a force of will I focussed my thoughts beyond my discomfort, I invoked a magical barrier.

Sure enough, and much to my consternation, all my magical mana depleted, but the buffeting cold was gone, and upon opening my eyes, a magical transparent force field shimmered around me. It didn't warm me up exactly, but, by keeping the cold from depleting my heat, I had a chance to survive.

In my minds-eye, I had imagined a force field, something one of my gaming characters from a Star Wars game had had. The barrier conformed to my body, almost skin-tight. It was then that I noticed my breath wasn't going out, but around the barrier between skin and barrier, and when I tried to take a breath, it was difficult. My lips pressing against, and sucking up to the barrier. *Had I just blocked myself from being able to breathe air?*

Heart racing again, I adjusted and envisioned a small opening near my mouth and felt the cold air rush in. I quickly sucked in some air but didn't enjoy being cocooned in a whole body force field. *It was not that bad though, considering the alternative and at least allowed me to breathe.* Taking in big gulps of air I expanded my chest and felt the constricting nature of the force field and wondered how long this could last. My Mana bar was at 2% and flickered to 4% and then back to 2%. I could see that in making this protective barrier, I had consumed almost 75% of my Mana pool and it required additional Mana to be maintained. As long as I used this, I would not be doing any other magical miracles soon.

Deciding this would do, for now, I continued to make my way towards the trees. It felt like I was walking inside a plastic bag while immersed in water. Wading through the half meter deep snow I found the whole experience strange and confining. *I would definitely have to think of a way*

*to make this less restrictive and more useful once I found a safe place to camp. I missed my snowshoes from Nico Sim.*

I noticed my health bar was getting back above 50% and rising along with my Mana bar. *The damage I had done internally was being repaired as a freebie by Grant and the machines attached to me. I had learned the lesson though, and I would have to be extra careful about what magic I used.*

Under the trees, it was eerily still. The snow wasn't as thick on the ground, but a healthy dose had trickled down from the overburdened branches above, covering the ground in a blanket of white.

Icicles hung like daggers from almost every branch, but the cold had prevented any runoff from gaining momentum. Freezing all moisture solid. If I weren't so pressed for time, I would have taken a moment to enjoy the invigorating beauty of the scenery as the light played into the crystal structures and created a kaleidoscope of mesmerizing patterns. As it was, I could only see the cold starkness as an obstacle to my survival. I immediately gathered broken branches, trying to dig up dry bracken, foliage, and whatever I could find. There wasn't a lot, but I collected what I could in one hand, often fumbling with it because of the barrier surrounding me. My hands never actually made contact and seeing the kindling floating an inch above my grasp was quite distracting. The steaming vent for my breathing obscured my vision most of the time.

Caught up in my task, I didn't hear it at first. Probably the first I noticed of the disturbance was a rumbling sensation through my feet. The ground transferring the vibration to my cocooned body. It got progressively more disturbing until I could hear it like an agitation gaining in pitch and volume. I had felt a similar sensation a few years ago when hiking and witnessing an avalanche in the next valley over.

Although this was slightly different.

*My first thought was to run, then reconsidering, I thought I should rather find out what the threat was.* I Stepped out from the tree-line, and looked across the area I had walked across and even further along the valley floor to where the river used to flow. It was all iced up now. That's where I spotted them.

At first, a few black dots appeared, coming out from around the natural curve in the valley, then a milling crowd of black dots that became larger as they gained ground and of course, as luck would have it they were heading in my direction.

*Was I safe here amongst the trees? I wasn't sure. But what I was sure about was that a huge herd of elk was stampeding towards me and I had to do something fast if I wanted to avoid being a casualty.* So I climbed the nearest tree. I had to dispel my magical barrier to do it, and by the time I reached a branch that could support me, I was frozen as an ice-lolly. It didn't help that my family jewels were pressed against the wood and bark, while I clambered up and were rubbed raw from the friction.

Once in the tree I gained a good vantage and watched as the magnificent beasts plowed their way through the valley. Thousands of them creating a plume of snowy mist like a billowing avalanche moving through the area. Their bellowing and clattering a sharp contrast to what had been a peaceful and quiet afternoon in the frigid wilds before their arrival.

That was when I heard the call that made me shiver. It wasn't from the cold.

A wolf howl echoed across the forest, followed by similar calls on the other side of the elk herd, and I now saw why the creatures were stampeding.

Wolves are opportunistic feeders. Hunting in packs, they rush their prey, causing weak or young animals to be isolated from the herd and then wear them down as huge fangs tear out first the hindquarters to hamstring the prey and then the throat to get at the arterial blood.

A delicacy for the hungry wolves in this cold and unforgiving climate.

As it happened, they managed to isolate an elder, weaker cow, which like me, thought her salvation was amongst the trees. She was running but had a labored appearance. Like the life had already left her.

Her hunched agonized gait just couldn't keep up with the others and breaking free from the herd she practically step-for-step followed my trail to where I was hiding in the trees. By all that is twisted or else by simple bad luck, they managed to chase her down and rip her apart not five meters from the tree I had sought refuge in.

The spectacle sickened me as I watched the pack rush in, grab a bite, and then rush out while she milled around snorting in agony and shock, trying to back her haunches against a tree, while swaying her small stubby antlers menacingly. The wily wolves never gave her a chance. While one distracted her attention, another would sweep in diagonally until one of her hamstrings was damaged and finally without any fight left in her, she collapsed and they swarmed her.

The ripping, snarling, yipping of the excited wolves was not a pretty sight. I had activated my barrier against the cold again, and it seemed like, with all things, that practice makes perfect. I was able to imagine the barrier into the shape of a coat with a hoodie, leaving my face free. The leggings I imagined to cover my legs right to the tops of my feet, but left my bare soles free. This was so I could feel the traction they made with the branch I was perched on. My hands were similarly free. These extra details weren't hard to implement, and with the refinement of the barrier, I was able to use much less Mana. I figured I was going to be stuck in this tree for some time, so I might as well be comfortable. Glancing at the wolves enjoying their meal, I noticed a commotion.

They had managed to tear open her belly and for some reason, her warm entrails burst out like an uncoiling high-pressure hose. The entrails bursting forth startled the skittish wolves, who yowling in surprise scattered back to wait for the entrails to settle.

Instead of settling, the writhing mass took on a shape. A struggling slumping shape. To my absolute horror, I realized the dead cow was heavily pregnant and had probably been on the verge of giving birth, thus her inability to run as fast as the others. The struggling mass that had startled the hungry wolves appeared to be a new almost-born calf, caught up in this bizarre and deadly struggle for life and death.

I was fairly immune to savage death. Anyone from Africa would tell you that this was just nature. I didn't have to like it though. How unfair was this? The poor innocent creature would hardly have time to take its first breath when life would be snatched away from it in the first instant. No, I just couldn't sit idly by and watch this happen. I just couldn't.

Without a conflicting thought in my head, I jumped down from the branch that supported me, rolled to break my fall, then screaming at the top of my lungs, arms waving, I managed to shoot some fizzy sparkler fireballs at the now panic-stricken wolves. Yelping, snarling and fleeing, they gave

ground. My unexpected charge sent them all rushing from the immediate area.

It wouldn't be long before they decided I was also on the menu, so I had no time to mess around. I bent down and using my hands, tore open the birthing bag amidst all the gore of its dead mother. Grabbing the struggling calf under one arm, enveloping it within my magical cocoon I quickly clambered back up the tree from where I had been perched not a few moments before. Not thinking how I did it, but just doing it anyway.

My new body knew no limits and suddenly perched upon the branch again, holding the slippery and thoroughly unhappy young calf I realized what I had just done.

"Wow! " I shouted at the top of my lungs "That was awesome!"

*Of course, no one could hear me, but I really liked my new athleticism. I hadn't moved with such precision and focus in many years. What a rush!*

I glanced down at the calf I held and tried to comfort it. Its struggles were getting quite frantic. I could see that it was breathing at least, its breath billowing out like plumes from a steam train. My own breathing was doing the same.

The liquid goo of its birthing sack was stuck all over its fur and I would have to continue to keep it warm as well as myself.

The wolves had returned in force and were continuing with their meal. Their distrustful and hungry eyes flicking speculatively at my new little buddy and me perched a few meters off the ground from them.

Sitting down on the branch, I pulled the wriggling and now bleating creature onto my lap, and again experimenting with my powers, tried to adjust the hasty barrier I had made originally to more completely envelop it.

Somehow I managed to do it, the force field encompassing it seemed to calm it down. I did remember to leave its head free so it could breathe. The cute little calf promptly found one of my fingers and began to suckle. The suckling became quite forceful as it tried to get to the nonexistent milk; I wondered how long my hand could act as a pacifier.

Reflecting on my situation, I could only look on in awe and amazement. *How had the Absinthe created such a realistic world? It beggars the imagination.*

I decided that since I had nothing else to do, I should look at my battle log. It had been blinking quite prodigiously.

Opening it up I found the latest entries.

**Mini-quest:** Saving the Elk's Calf,  
Part 1 completed

Your reward:unknown

Proceed with caution and diligence and your rewards will be abundant.

I looked closely at the word “unknown” and another popup appeared:

Unknown rewards are granted at the end of a sequence of events provided you survive. If you are killed and respawn during this mission, your unknown reward will be forfeit.

# CHAPTER 12

## ALTRUISM?

Well, that sucked. I had little hope of surviving for seven days in this wilderness with what I had, and so I would most likely never see the reward.

At least I saved the little guy. I didn't save him for the reward anyway. I became a soldier because I believed in justice, I believed in freedom from tyranny, I believed in saving innocence and preserving peace at almost any cost.

In this case, it was a helpless animal I had saved, whereas back in the world it had been to save the ones I loved from terrorism and those who would do them harm.

Admittedly as an orphan, I didn't have that iconic family to save, but in some strange way, I had embraced a country as my family. Several countries in fact. Perhaps I had adopted more of an ideal.

Each country I served took me in when I was alone and isolated. They provided for me, giving me a purpose. I was a firm believer in giving back and balancing the scales. My inner conflict at my current situation though was not something I could reconcile with yet.

The hardest part was believing in this new cause. Well in the Absinthes cause. It wasn't my cause yet.

Were they really training me for the good of humankind? It was obvious what I was gaining from the deal.

My youth being the strongest statement on the baited hook. A supple and strong young body in exchange for what?

Add to that the miraculous ability to do this magic stuff and I had to admit that the baited hook was a bloody carcass, and I was the hapless great white shark taking the bite. Open toothy mouth already tearing into the flesh, eyes rolled back and far too committed to doing anything about it as the hook set in.



The calf bleated and nuzzled my hand in frustration. Clearly, it was hungry too. It was tugging and struggling against the barrier I had placed around. Trying to be free. I didn't see a way for a positive outcome for the little guy.

Simulation or not, everything felt so real, and if the mechanics of this world were real, then my newly saved calf would be dead in a couple of hours, and so I had to believe it was real and take it seriously.

From what I had gathered from the people I had met, the skills I picked up in these Sims would be needed. One of those skills would most likely not be animal husbandry.

Still, I had saved this defenseless creature. Awkward and ungainly, it struggled to survive with a will as strong as any life. It wanted to prevail. I wanted it to prevail.

"You are the first to have succeeded in that quest." The voice came from above me. It shocked me to the core and I almost fell from the tree in my fright. I couldn't stand with the baby elk in my lap so, feigning bravado, I turned my gaze up, "Who said that? Where are you?"

All that I got in response though was a very loud silence. I looked more carefully and noticed a movement in the foliage where an owl perched a few feet above me. It blinked at me then winked with one eye very deliberately.

Then in a clear a voice it said, "I am Horatio, pleased to meet you."

Even seeing and hearing this directly left me no better equipped to deal with it.

I blurted out stupidly, "You can talk?"

The owl turned its head away from me and the subsequent bobbing head left me with the impression it was chuckling.

Turning back it stated "Obviously" The bland staring owl face showed no emotion, but the twinkling eyes said otherwise. It was enjoying my discomfort immensely.

"To answer your question, I will require that you answer mine first." it stated.

Now I was suspicious. One thing I hated was to answer questions, and especially to beings, or constructs, for that must be what this was.

“Are you Grant?” I asked.

The owl tilted its head and said, “When you agree to my terms, I shall answer your questions. In this place nothing is free. One answer for another.”

Not having much choice I agreed. “Fair enough, although I would revise my question before we begin.” This game of 20 questions might be what it wanted, but I didn’t want to start off with something so banal as getting a yes or no reply.

“Deal!” it stated.

I tried to rephrase my question, “So as a simulation construct, your job is to observe and record what I do, my question is: Why are you interacting with me?”

“You will remember that you are to answer my question first?”

Now I had him, “Yes,” I replied, “and now you answer mine.”

Its eyes actually bulged when it realized I had tricked it, and this time the head bobbed in an annoyed fashion. It really was a large owl. One of those snowy owl types that bird enthusiasts were always looking out for.

“I can see you are experienced at this, so let’s get to the seeds of the fruit” Its head bobbed again, this time the bird was definitely laughing, its use of an idiom, not quite the one I was used to, but still clear enough to understand.

“I am interacting with you to discover your motivations, but also to offer you insight that can lead to a more successful campaign.”

“I see.”

A snarling conflict had started between two wolves tugging upon the same juicy morsel and both the bird and I were distracted for a moment. *It was easy to think that my situation was not life threatening, but nothing could be further from the truth. The wolves posed a very real danger, as did the cold. I also had all the additional worries, such as the calf, food, shelter, and most importantly how I was going to get to the extraction point.*

“My question is why did you rescue the calf?” Asked the owl named Horatio.

Taking a deep sigh, I tried to answer the owl as best as I could. I was getting tired of the banter and I wanted to get on with things.

“Horatio, I can’t rightly say at the moment. Everything is overwhelming, you know? What I felt when I saw the calf struggling through its mother’s intestines, struggling to be born with no chance of

survival. I connected with it. I felt like I was in that position, or rather that I had been. My Momma died giving birth to me, and my father took off right after that.”

“At the orphanage, they took me in because they had to. I learned to rely on myself, but it was no way for a kid to grow up. With no one really there to take care of me specifically. The system has no love, no empathy; It only has rules and regulations. If I stubbed my toe or felt sad, there wasn’t anyone to comfort me. I had to get up and face the fact that life wasn’t... isn’t fair. Every step along the way, every choice I made was to find out what I was made of.” I paused as my mind wrung out how to voice my deepest motivations.

“I wanted to find out if I had it in me to succeed in the most challenging environment. To prove to myself I was worth something. And I did. I survived and thrived. But there were many along the way who didn’t have it in them. Who needed a helping hand. I have learned over the years that no man is an island. That sometimes, in fact, most times you need to rely on your friends. Even if it’s just for a bit of validation. So when I saw this little guy in a hopeless situation, I thought, he needs a friend, so I put it on the line and made an effort. It was crazy I know. None of this is real, but it sure feels real and I bet it feels real for this little guy.”

I glanced down stroking the calf; it settled down from its struggling and had given up on my fingers. I looked up at Horatio. *A lot of what I had said to the owl was heartfelt deep sentiment. Why I had opened up, I had no idea. Anthropomorphizing the bird had been a good idea. With my innate connection to wildlife, this was an extremely devious tactic to get into my psyche. I would have to be more careful. I didn’t like people getting into my head.*

“Satisfied?” I enquired and then realized my mistake. Fortunately, the bird wasn’t paying attention or must have achieved its goal, because it bobbed its head again, then gagging it produced a pellet from its mouth that fell to the ground a few meters below, right amongst the wolves. It wasn’t an ordinary bird pellet that owls regurgitate; This one was golden and shiny. A few of the wolves were still gnawing at bones, but with full bellies, they were not that interested in me or the golden pellet.

“I take it that is for me?” I enquired.

“Yes,” replied Horatio, and this time he didn’t let me off the hook. His smug bird-brained expression made me smile in appreciation. As far as distractions go, regurgitation has to be right up there.

“Okay, so what’s your next question?”

“What is your class?”

“That’s an easy one. I thought you would know already being part of the whole system. I’m a Prodigy Class.”

“I am an entity Petros, not a program. I am in fact a different species from you as well as the Absinthe, at this time my species and the Absinthe are allies.”

“At this time?” I interrupted. “You mean you might consider going against the Absinthe?”

“Let me put it this way. We will always be allies with the Absinthe because we have no other choice. If things change, we may take another view. Isn’t this the way of all living sapients?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I have very little to go by, so I cannot make any judgments right now. It is my experience that people always look out for their own best interests, not really for others. Altruism is a myth.”

“What about you Petros? Didn’t you just save a calf at great personal risk and with little benefit?”

He had me there, I thought a bit and then replied, “In retrospect, I did it more to assuage my guilt at witnessing such a barbaric act rather than for the calf’s benefit. If I had really thought it through, I would have left the little guy to his fate. It would be a faster death than what he will experience with me now. At best he will be my dinner later when he succumbs to the cold and starvation.”

“Ah, and there we have it, altruism at its finest. An act benefiting both of you.”

I was tired of this game. “So why are you here? I see we have stopped the 20 questions game, just be straight up with me. Direct approach. What is your purpose? What do you hope to achieve?”

“Part of my purpose is to convey that you are learning to fight not just for the Absinthe, not just for humanity, but also for other beings. The Absinthe represent a consortium of sapients that are against brutal expansionist policies.”

“Irony isn’t it? Training me to kill on your behalf and yet you spout anti-brutality rhetoric?”

“Alas a sad truth, and I believe you are aware of this conundrum being a soldier, The truth that to prevent bad policy, one needs to enforce laws and respond with repercussions to those less inclined to follow edicts of the law for the greater good.”

“Are you saying you are training me to be a cop? A police officer?”

“Not at all Petros. We are training you to survive and teach you the limits of your potential. We have challenges that will become your challenges in time, and how you solve them is a self-styled solution. You will either be violent or lenient based on your own preconceived ideals. We test you and train you to find out what those ideals may be and then deploy you into situations that might need your specific solution, be it justice or anarchy.”

“I see,” I replied, I didn’t quite get it, but wanted us to move on with the conversation. “And what race or species are you?”

“I am not unknown to your people. We are embedded in legend and folklore. Many great works from any library have cataloged and described us in great detail. I’m sure you have heard of the “Elves” before?”

“What? Elves? Are you kidding me? Elves are aliens?” I burst into disbelieving laughter. “Now that is one for the ages. Man, I love my life. I feel like the Hobbit, what was his name? Bilbo Baggins, that’s right. You have dragged me into something so much weirder than I ever could have imagined even in my wildest dreams.”

“It is true, Petros, I am an Elf. An Elder Elf, but before I continue, I will pause the Sim so we can converse without disrupting your chance at survival.”

# CHAPTER 13

## ILLUMINOUS

I felt the world around me shift and I was transported to a new world, A new place. It was sunny, cheerful, and glorious. The shift was quite startling, and if I wasn't sitting, I would have fallen from vertigo. It felt like I had the rug ripped from beneath me. This world was in high summer, with a cool breeze. Luscious grass stretched out all around me and in the distance, majestic trees formed what appeared to be a city of magnificent proportions. I could see people, no they were Elves, all busy going about their business.

Before me stood not an owl, but a man, dressed as if I was immersed in Tolkein's world. The flowing white, almost golden robe surrounded him regally. Long flowing locks of blond hair with sharp-pointed ears peaking out on either side of his head signified not a man but an elf. His wise, handsome and somehow ageless face smiled, but his teeth were unexpectedly sharp. Despite the gentle smile on his face, the teeth gave him a predatory smile. Standing up, I stepped forward, hand outstretched.

"Petros Arkansas" I introduced myself.

Surprised, he stepped back, and then smiling again, stepped forward to grasp my hand.

"Welcome to Illuminous, I am Horatio." he intoned. His voice was rich, vibrant and full of musical tones that left me wanting him to speak more. Nothing like the voice that had emitted from the owl shape we had left behind in that frigid Sim.

"How is this possible? Ah, never mind, nothing surprises me anymore. Why are we here?"

“We are in my world, Petros. We are the Elves from your legends, and I would teach you about life magic and earth magic and dabble in other magic along the way. Do not be startled and feel at peace here. There are no tricks, traps, or dangers here for you. Be welcome.”

As he said this a pop-up appeared.

You have accessed the Illuminous Realm through direct invitation. You now bear the mark of a welcome guest and will be recognized as such by all who dwell on Illuminous.

A chime dinged in my skull and a bright golden glow suffused my being. The trailing golden dust streamed around me and then slammed into my forehead, making me see stars. Blinking rapidly I tried to clear my vision. Deciding to close my eyes rather and wait for the effect to wear off. I looked upon my avatar in my Character sheet and saw a golden eye had impressed itself upon my brow. Like the eye of Horus. Opening my eyes, I immediately felt my forehead but felt no physical change.

Horatio smiled. “The eye is marked on your soul Petros. It won’t leave any visible scar or blemish. However, should anyone challenge your right to be here, it will appear and they will know that you belong.”

“That’s some pretty cool security you have. Is this like a secret level in the Sim?”

“Hmm?” Horatio pondered imperiously, then replied, “Are you aware of dimensions? That every universe has additional universes within alternate dimensions? I won’t bore you with the mathematics, but I have been informed that humankind has progressed to mathematically prove the existence of alternate dimensions and is also quite far along with quantum computing. Both of these are strongly related.”

“So if you imagine that almost everything conceivable can be described mathematically, and that the mathematics can be represented upon a graph for any given dimension, then two intersecting graphs would essentially mean those points are sharing the same space and time?”

“I thought you weren’t going to bore me” I smiled at him, “but please carry on, I am following you at the moment.”

Horatio didn’t stop at my interruption and continued as if I hadn’t spoken. This meant a lot to him and was probably important on some level.

“Well, if you extrapolate points in virtual reality, are they not mathematical concepts? The blending of computer processing into three-dimensional pockets to form virtual worlds is quite common on your Earth. There are many examples of computer games as well as simulations. However, participants in such games are simply looking in upon those worlds without ever really touching them. When you do the constructing using quantum processing, it reaches a level of realism that is almost impossible to distinguish from the real. I am using the “real” meaning the real world, as you know it within your space-time curve.”

“Each computer interface that people use to access those virtual worlds would be considered a crossover point, or a point of intersection. Similarly, our pocket dimension intersects with the Sim and the Real at many places along the space-time curve. Illuminous, therefore, is as real as your world. We have survived here for many thousands of years and we do so because of our truce with the Absinthe.”

“Okay Horatio, You are definitely boring me now. My eyes are crossing over from all the technicalities. I get what you are saying is that worlds touch and everything is connected. What I am curious about is how are we speaking the same language? If I remember the stories of Elves, you all spoke Elven?”

“Petros, your question has an answer, but you should glean it from your own mind. I am not speaking “English” even though your mind hears my English words. Similarly, you are not speaking Elven, although my mind is hearing you use Elven”

“Ah, so we are using mind speak and my brain is just filling in the blanks. Cool. Back to what you were saying though, basically you are Real in this world, but I am a projection, similar to you being a projection in the winter simulation we just came from?”



“Exactly. Although this will feel like a Sim to you, our world has enough magic in it to convey the sensations you will need to believe you are really here. So let’s start your training.”

While we were talking, a couple of kids who had been playing in the meadows gathered closer and were chatting excitedly. I smiled at them and their sharp-toothed grins in return didn’t exactly ease my mind. In fact, it was rather unnerving. I felt like I was potential prey. What I did remember of Tolkien’s books was that the Elven races were a peaceful sort, immersed in magic and the land.

When the land was threatened they rose up and used their considerable might to own their foes. I did not recall them having sharp teeth. Were these “Elves” the same ones from legend, or had they conveniently taken on the name to assuage my fears. Time would tell. Clearly this introduction to the Illuminous realm was part of Saving the Elk Part 2.

“Okay, so what do we do?” I asked Horatio, who had been backing up and had conjured a staff in his hand. It was plain; about two meters long and had none of the extras one would imagine a magic user to have, like a bejeweled nob at the end.

“Just stand there Petros and defend yourself. I have to determine what ability you have.” He did a few stretches, lunges and then, without warning attacked. It wasn’t a magical attack. He damn well swung that long staff and tried to take my head off. I was used to unarmed combat and a whole lot of other combat besides. Sticks or knives, staves or staffs. I had been hit with them at one time or another in my life and had hit others with them too. I knew what to do. I instinctively rolled my head out of the way, watching the tip swish past the tip of my nose, just a hair's breadth from contact. I could tell it would have left me senseless and probably dead on the floor if Horatio had made contact. He sure wasn’t playing around.

The kids cheered loudly as our sparing became more heated. He was skilled and attacked me with deft flicks, a reverse sweep, and a good few prods. Managing to hit me deflected blows. They may have been

deflections, but the pain meter was all the way up and they stung like crazy. What I really needed was a weapon to defend myself.

Was I supposed to just take this abuse and continue to be battered until he got tired? Absently I wondered where my trusty staff was and no sooner had I thought about it when it appeared in my hand. I fumbled in surprise but could deftly block his next attack.

When the staff appeared, Horatio exclaimed “Hazaah!” loudly and then upped the tempo of his attacks as if the previous ones had been a warmup. I wasn’t panting, but my heart was racing as long-forgotten techniques kicked into muscle memory and my actions got smoother and faster in concert with Horatio’s attacks. The flow of it all was mesmerizing and exhilarating and as I moved I felt something warm inside me buzzing. Like a buildup of static electricity. The power built and built and the more exultant I felt the faster we went until I could see, anticipate and react almost before Horatio’s next swing.

Deciding I had had enough of this I stepped within his guard and while blocking his awkward recovery, I flat palmed him in the chest pushing him away from me. It was at this point that the static discharged.

Horatio went flying. I don’t mean he fell a few meters from me. I mean he went airborne. I was startled and amazed. Still flying 30 meters away, he eventually touched down. His shoulders were the better part of his landing gear. Then as he gained traction, his body started to roll and then slide and then gradually came to a stop. Through the whole experience, I had looked at his face and seen complete and utter astonishment before the rigors of his fall broke our eye contact. The children who had gathered cheered delightedly and some older ones ran to Horatio to give him aid. He was busy standing up, brushing himself off. One kid brought his staff back and grabbing it graciously he limped back to stand before me.

I had a sheepish grin on my face. I had never in all my days been able to do something as cool as that. This body was awesome. How could I ever go back to Earth when I could do this?

“Are you okay?” I asked. “I’m sorry for the shove. It was completely way more than I intended.” *Inwardly I reveled in what I had just done and thought that would teach him to start full no-holds-barred combat with me.*

Horatio just hummed and then from his barely able to move position he straightened, gave me a wicked toothy smile and pointed his finger at me and the very grass I was standing on began to grow, entangling first my feet, then my legs. I tried to use the stick but sticks are great at beating things, blocking things and burning, but they are useless at cutting things.

No sooner did I have the thought and the staff I held warped and suddenly I held a short sword. It was on the way to hacking at some grass around my feet and I had to will myself to stop in case I cut my whole foot off. I was beginning to see the pattern here. This trusty stick I had been carrying with me was a multi-tool of sorts. I could visualize it to be different types of weapons depending on the situation. That would have been very handy if I had known a few Sims ago. Well, as they say, you live and learn.

I then proceeded to hack myself free of the clinging grass. It got frantic as I cut it away but once free I did a backflip landing in an area free of the vicious grass.

Horatio still smiling said “Enough!” and the grass retracted and it left me panting, staring wildly around, looking for the next batch of dangers.

“Fear not Petros, the assessment is over, come, let us get refreshments and I can begin to instruct you.”

He turned his back and walked towards the tree city. The kids gathered around began to disperse, although one little girl came up to me and reaching out touched my arm. Then giggling she ran away to tell her friends of the achievement. Kids, you can never understand them, and they will always surprise you.

I jogged quickly to Horatio and asked, “Any chance I can get clothes?” I was still only clad in my loincloth.

“You surprise me, Petros. You display intuitive skills without effort, you tap into magical abilities that some of my people take years to master and yet you don’t know how to conjure yourself simple clothes?”

I almost blushed when I realized what he was saying. Like the force barrier I had conjured in Winter Sim, I could probably do the same for clothes. I just needed to visualize them and imbue them with color and apply a little magic and voila I would be clothed. As we walked, I did this, cycling from Bermuda shorts to Wrangler jeans, settling on the jeans. These fit me way better than any pair I had ever owned. I looked good in them too. I could probably feature in one of those Abercrombie & Fitch adverts. I decided that I should probably try imitating the clothing style of my host, but kept the jeans on underneath. With a thought and willpower, I conjured a robe. I chose blue. Blue is a neutral color, and it made me feel comfortable.

The robe settled around me and felt soft and supple. I tried something then. I willed the staff away, and it promptly disappeared. Willing it back, it reappeared. I was getting the hang of this. I then imagined an H&K MP5 submachine gun. A weapon I was intimately familiar with, but nothing happened. Trying again, I imagined my K-bar combat knife. Sure enough, the staff transformed into the knife. Awesome! This is more like it. I went one step further.

When what I imagined appeared in my hand, I smiled in amazement and pure satisfaction. The balance was perfect; The folded dull metal blade with a slight banana curve extended almost a full meter from the grip. A Katana! Not just any Katana but my very own collector's item, straight from the mantle above my fireplace. This would make a huge difference. A game-changer. No more stumbling through Sims weaponless. The huge smile on my face came to an abrupt end as I realized I had left the calf behind in the meadow.

“Horatio, wait, I have to get the elk.”

“Don’t worry Petros, the animal will be perfectly safe and tended to by the children. Come on, we are almost there.”

“Where? Where are we going?”

The Elven city seemed to grow the closer we came to it. I could see suspended bridges branching between the trees, steps curving around the massive trunks extending high into the tree canopy. Doorways and windows appeared the whole way up the massive trees.

Higher up the tree, the bridges became more magical? Seeming to be reinforced by light force shields, the golden glow of the shields sparkling with the sunlight making the whole city glow with abundant light and brightness. People moved from trunk to trunk going about their business along the pathways interconnecting everything.

Some trees were big enough to be building size, Elves coming in and going out open doorways into what appeared to be large roomy halls within. If I didn't believe in magic before, I sure did now. Some Elves turned to look at our approach, but generally, we were ignored.

Two strange horse-like beasts and four guards stood at the entrance to the boundary of the forested area. The horses had sharp teeth, and a ruff around their neck like a harness yolk, extending down their chests and along down to their groin. Like a mix between a horse and lion. Their eyes had the look of reptiles or birds. When they glanced at me, it was anything but friendly. They were not harnessed in any way, and seemed to participate in the guard duty as much as being beasts of burden. Having one of those to ride would be quite thrilling I thought offhandedly.

Realizing I was beginning to settle into this insane lifestyle I was embracing. When strange beasts and mystical cities became the norm, it said a lot for the human mind and how quickly it can adjust to change.

I quickly realized someone had asked me something, but I had not been paying attention.

“Pardon?” I said quizzically to the group which included Horatio now as they all turned to me awaiting my answer.

“They asked if you mean harm to anyone or anything in the city.” stated Horatio patiently.

“Who me? Nope, I’m just here for the training. Amazing place though. I’ve never seen the like.”

As I said this, there was a strange feeling on my brow as the Horus insignia brightened and then faded. This seemed to quell the guard’s stares, and they moved aside letting us through. Each held his fist to his heart as Horatio passed and the horse beasts lowered their eyes subserviently. He undoubtedly was someone important.

“If you like how it looks from the outside, you will love the inner city. Sadly, we are not here for sightseeing. I am taking you directly to the library, where you will have to do research into what you now know as Magic.”

“Research?” I said disdainfully thinking of the long mathematical rant Horatio had given me earlier. “I thought the training was all practical? I have been fine so far. Why the sudden change?”

“What you have used is instinctive, it doesn’t help you when you want to deliberately do something magical unless you understand the mechanics and thought processes that trigger those responses. Do you not agree?”

“Fair enough,” I said, “I just thought my days of active study were behind me. Admittedly, this whole magic business is fascinating. Knowing more about it will help a lot.”

We walked on for a while beneath the magnificent trees, along a flattened road of sorts that linked between all the trees.

“I feel like I am in a web, but are you guys the spiders or the flies?”

Horatio eyed me speculatively “When Grant told me you were not a trusting sort, I didn’t realize how right he was. Understandable though, under the circumstances. Rest easy Petros, we mean you no harm. In the interests of goodwill, I have allowed you to see our inner sanctum. Our capital city on this world in an alternate dimension, and is really our last

refuge. Our foe hunts us relentlessly and we seldom let anyone have access without many security checks and clearance. When I saw you risk yourself to rescue the Elk calf, you immediately showed yourself as someone whom we could trust. When I heard you are a Prodigy, I realized that events are swinging in our favor and that you needed specialized training sooner rather than later. While I don't mean to pressure you, I think you can handle it."

"You keep talking about the enemy. Who is the enemy? Why do I have to face them?"

We were now deep in the forest city and a large clearing surrounded two ultra-huge trees in the center. The one tree seemed slightly larger around than the other, but when I say city block size big, I'm not exaggerating. I would not have noticed that these two trees were special except that the surrounding clearing was equally large. Making the two trees stand out proudly in all their isolated magnificence.

Their height was equally as impressive as their girth. They extended up, up and away as far as I could see, and the network of bridges that had webbed throughout the forest before, stopped as if the open ground was a barrier extending to the heavens.

There was a network of bridges linking the two trees to each other, however. The ornate spectacle of hundreds of riding guardsmen in aggressive lines and formations left little doubt that these two trees were the center of power in Illuminous and that entry to here was strictly controlled.

Forgetting my train of thought, I just stared in amazement. "Is that the Palace?" I queried slack-jawed.

"Yes, the Palace and the Grand Library of Illuminous, our two most illustrious and cherished treasures. Welcome Petros, now follow me. We are almost there."

As I stepped onto the open courtyard between the forest city and the massive island trees of the palace and library, my forehead began to tingle. It quickly subsided, and I realized I must have passed the security checks again.

We made our way between two massive roots forming a balustrade on either side that grew hundreds of lesser roots to join together in the middle forming into ornate functional stairs. The stairs, perfectly level and polished from daily use, led to a somewhat underwhelming doorway at the base of the tree, which opened when we approached.

There weren't any elves around us anymore. It seemed as if few elves ventured to these important buildings. Rushing to keep up with the smooth gait of Horatio, as he glided effortlessly up the stairs and into the doorway, I had a last look around at the spectacle. The guards in the courtyard had formed up on either side and were facing outwards towards the city. I could tell that they marched around the two trees to designated points, then stood to attention.

Most likely they would march and guard like this, moving clockwise all day long. It was a sharp regiment with prestigious black shimmering uniforms. Each man had a bow across his back, a sword at his side and a staff in one hand, which he used to direct the beast they were astride. The officers wore blue, brown, and gold on their lapels. I guessed this depicted which regiment or unit they represented or else the rank of that individual. Each cohort or platoon had easily 50 men and associated beasts of burden. They moved methodically like the arms of a clock rotating around and around. These Elf men marched and guarded tirelessly. From my vantage point, I could see just less than an arc of 160-degrees and four arms of the clock extended towards the tree line. If the pure grandeur of the place didn't attest to its importance to these people, then the sheer number of guards surrounding what was supposed to be a safe place definitely put it into perspective. I don't even think the Pentagon had so many active guards moving about at one time.

Horatio was standing with an elderly wizened elf, who was glaring at my lack of decorum with distaste. Hurriedly I joined them and extended my hand for a traditional greeting. The man stepped back surprised and no fewer than a dozen elves materialized with weapons cocked, drawn and raised threateningly.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed, pausing. "I'm just introducing myself."



Horatio quickly signaled the guards to back away, and that it was okay. They promptly faded away and the Elder Elf stepped forward to grasp my hand. His grip was strong and assured.

“I am Petros Arkansas,” I said and perhaps squeezed harder than I would usually. Not surprising considering my adrenaline had just spiked at the appearance of so many guards from out of nowhere.

“Welcome Petros Arkansas” the Elf intoned, his face still serious, his handshake released, and he appeared slightly flustered. His deep voice was reminiscent of James Earl Jones.

“I am King Albarkin.” There was a pregnant pause, because what do you say after an introduction like that?

I tried anyway, “King? um, your highness, that is to say, umm Sir?, well I have never met a King before, my usual form of address to anyone on the brass path to heaven is ‘Sir’. How do I address you? Sir, and to what do I owe this unexpected honor?”

Horatio, who had been stoic the whole time, suddenly radiated a bright smile. “Father, you are being too stern. This human is from the Absinthe and has the qualities we need. You know Humans left the monarchy system behind for what they call democratic society. The last thing we need is another groveling subject. This one has lots of potential and we need men of his ilk.”

I was still stuck on the “Father” statement, reconciling the way the everyday citizens had moved out of our way and the guards around this place had paid us little mind. Horatio was the Prince of the realm. This explained a lot.

King Albarkin was still looking at me speculatively. “He is not fully realized, and may present the same issues we had before.”

The King stated this ambiguously and Horatio quickly interrupted him patiently explaining.

“Father, he is untrained, we have the acorn to sculpt the perfect tree. Don’t be so easy to discount him. With no magical training, he bested me out in the field. He completed the first phase of Saving the Elk calf quest. The first ever to do so. I tell you Father, this time we will succeed.”

“Harrumph...” intoned the King and then nodded to me and turned to leave. His last statement to me left me reeling. “If you should succeed, it would mean a great deal to me and my kind. I wish you good luck. You will need it.”

With that he turned and I was left standing with Horatio in the large hall. I looked sternly at Horatio who had the good sense to look guilty. Clearly there was more going on here than I was aware of. Not a new state of affairs by any means, but at least in this I would have some answers.

“Prince Horatio, what the hell is going on?” I said, arms folded and not in any mood to continue without them.

“Ah, well, my father meeting us here was... unexpected. I am going to tell you everything, but first, let's get into the library proper and find some refreshments shall we?”

I relented, and we approached another set of doors opposite to the way the king had left.

As they opened before us, my breath caught and I spluttered. What I saw within was so absolutely beyond comprehension I nearly fainted.

As far as I could see and as high as I could see were shelves and shelves of books, tomes, tablets and parchments. Scrolls too. They stretched up the sides of the library in every conceivable way possible, right to the very heights of the tree where a deep and rich green glow emanated from a large gem at the very top. The inner sanctum held tables, benches, and chairs with scholars busily doing scholarly things, but if you were to imagine a huge sports stadium, then the shelves extended around like the seating within that stadium and the center field was where the tables nestled. Shelves, upon shelves upon shelves of books radiated outwards. If I could imagine a million books, then those would probably fit in a single row of seating on

one platform. It was filled to capacity with books and a soft magical light sprinkled around, highlighting dust motes as they moved through this place of wonder. I was speechless and stumbled on through the doors, turning and turning to take in this magnificent view.

“It loses its impact when you have grown up spending most of your life here” stated Horatio offhandedly “Although you are not the first human to have entered here, almost all have reacted as you have done. I quite enjoy the spectacle. It makes me appreciate anew just how marvelous our library really is. Come! Time is passing and you need to use every minute to good effect.”

# CHAPTER 14

## TRAINING

We walked to the center where the tables were arranged, and a young scholar intercepted us and guided us towards an alcove that was inset upon the stage in the middle. It appeared to be a private booth, with a small surrounding wall. Above waist height it was open so you could sit within and still look out to the surrounding area. Similar booths were interspersed and while I could see elves conversing and gesticulating animatedly, I could hear nothing. Within the booth, Horatio explained that there were sound dampening spells that made it possible to have private meetings while still being able to access any relevant material required from the library. Quite a neat trick I thought, stepping into the booth.

With a gesture the female scholar “sealed” us into our thought bubble space and moved off. The table within the booth had a pot of steaming tea and two cups ready to receive it. I was parched and gladly accepted my cup. Horatio pouring for both of us. The scent was a heady mixture of citrus, mint and possibly chamomile and I gulped down the scalding brew with relish, it just needed a few spoons of sugar, but then what did I know? The familiar euphoria pervaded my being as I felt my aches and worries subside from the drink. It left me refreshed however and not doped up as my usual feeding and drinking times did.

“Right,” said Horatio, “I’m sure you have gathered by now you are not the first Prodigy class that has come through, but I must point out there have only been two before you and none had nor will receive the training you will get. Other classes are standard fare and do well enough grouped together strategically, but if we are to make significant strides, then we need to train more Prodigies. Your versatility and adaptability are really important.” He motioned with his hand to cut off my next question, “The enemy I have been inferring are known as the Reapers by my people. It is a name that describes exactly what they do. They scourge galaxy after galaxy,

devouring and reaping all resources within. Their expansionist policy has stages. Right now they are in a consolidation phase, but their hunger and thirst for knowledge and life is second only to our own. However, instead of synergising with new sapient species, seeding them with the ability to become self-sufficient, they destroy everything they come into contact with. A universe is a massive place, with more than enough space and resources for every species to coexist, unless you are a Reaper.”

“Reapers need to reap from others what they themselves cannot grow. In fact they have long lost the ability to grow without drinking in the life force of another. It is an ambrosia of power for them. Consider them as you would consider mythical undead creatures. Zombies, Ghouls and Vampires. Spirit-wraiths, Liches and so forth. Many of your kind have attributed such names to the various classes of creatures you will face. One thing they all have in common is a thirst for devouring life, and a driving desire to absorb your own life force into their collective. But before they do that, through an array of physical and mental tortures they will rip out every aspect of knowledge you have acquired to further their own goals and similarly use it against your kind. They extinguished our home world in your plane of existence many eons ago and now they travel absorbing galaxy after galaxy. Extinguishing life and searching out new avenues to feed their... hunger.”

Horatio paused to eye me sternly, “We as a people, and several other races from our home world were lost wanderers until we found out how to travel between planes and created this world you now stand in. Sadly, a simulacrum of our original home, not exactly our world but close enough that we derive comfort from it.

The Elves that grow up here today don’t know the difference though, and that is important for their sense of self. We have been here just over 2000 of your earth years.” Horatio took a breather and gained a faraway look in his eyes.

I sat back too, looking at Horatio as he told me this news. It was a touchy subject and heartfelt as he told it to me. His voice catching several times in the telling.

I leaned forward again and reached to give his shoulder a pat of comfort. He smiled at the familiarity and nodded again as if confirming what his own mind told him, “You see Petros, you care about what happens to people. You care what happens to creatures and you care enough to do something about it. I have seen it in the results of your tests so far. I see it now in your actions to comfort me. It is the way of the true warrior to show strength when needed and to show compassion and kindness whenever else possible.”

“I can’t begin to process everything you have told me, and I have many questions but when your father, the King was speaking he spoke as if we were running out of time. He seemed like a man bereft and adrift. I have seen many men of power and your father carries it not as a responsibility but as a burden. Forgive my frankness, but just what does he expect from me and what have I gotten myself involved in.” I replied, laying my cards upon the table.

“I forget how perceptive humans can be. You have had your “ways” opened so you will be additionally perceptive. You see, the Reapers have my sister.” His voice catching in his throat again. “Princess Adrianna. We believe the information that led to my sister’s capture was from the last Prodigy whom she trained.”

“So you see why he is skeptical about your involvement, but believe me, you have sprouted a seed of hope in his heart and in mine and we will endeavor to do as much as we can to enable you to gain power, harness your skills and abilities and use them to help us recover my sister.”

“Your sister? Wow, just wow! That is information overload Horatio, seriously TMI. Too Much Information. I hardly know you. How can you lay that at my feet? And what do the Absinthe have to do with all this?”

“Ah, forgive me, Petros, if our need weren’t so dire, you would have been introduced to the information I have given you over weeks, if not months. I would have had time to become your friend. As it is, I would hope that still happens, but we have neither the time, nor luxury of pruning the plant. I would teach you magic. Earth, Air, and Water magic are my

specialties, although I have only had about 200 years to study them. A true master such as my father would be a better tutor, but in his current state of mind, the situation is best served with my help.”

“The Absinthe?” I prompted, while absently storing away how long it took to study magic, not to mention that Horatio was claiming to be over 200 years old and yet looked mid-thirties. No wonder they wanted me starting right away.

“Ah, yes, the Absinthe. I am not sure their story is mine to tell, but I will tell you they have also lost their homeworld to the Reapers. They are also pro-life and do their best to help sapient life rise to their full potential. We call the Absinthe "The Ancients" because they are the oldest sapient life form we know of. What they have forgotten, our race has still to learn. They are the ones who gave us the technology to delve between planes of existence. I believe they are the ones to have seeded your world with our histories and legends. They also seem to influence the rate of technological advancement upon your world so it will better prepare you for when the Reapers come. I am uncertain but I suspect that some of our races were transported to your world during the great fracture.”

“It is a period of upheaval and persecution we faced before coming together and building our new homeland. It may be that humanity has Elf ancestors and accounts for your magical affinities. However, I digress. What I want to say about the Ancients, or Absinthe as you call them is that they are old and divergent in their ways. Many of them believe they should be watchers and guides to the universe, that it is their sole responsibility. This belief has two sides, though, and one side wants a hands-off approach. Essentially, they are prepared to accept if the Reapers continue to wipe biological life from the universe.”

“They believe that the Reaper, are a form of life and it is their right to prevail. The faction who help us and are responsible for your abduction are from the other branch of the tree. They believe the Reapers are an aberration and should not be allowed to prosper. Fortunately for us and for you, they believe it so strongly that they are prepared to facilitate doing more than just sit by and let the Reapers wreak havoc.”

“Cry Havoc! And let slip the dogs of war.” I quoted Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar while sighing through the process. It was so much bigger than me. It all was so much bigger than I could ever have thought possible. A few weeks ago I was a retired Colonel getting comfortable with the idea that my days of action were behind me and now I was facing world destruction by creatures that were found only in nightmares and “B” grade movies. Until now.

What the hell! I thought coming to a decision, and aloud said “Nike!”

Horatio was lost in his thoughts and looked up quizzically.

“Nike!” I said again, this time more forcefully, then noticing Horatio’s vacant look, I explained slightly embarrassed. “A Goddess’s name with an associated slogan ‘Just do it!’.” I then confirmed, “I’m in Horatio. What do I have to do?”

And perhaps for the very first time since my abduction, I released all thoughts of going back to Earth and my old life. I released my anger at having been abducted. I let it all go and embraced the cause fully. Heaven help our foes because I had a mission. I am a man of action.

The next few hours passed in a blur. Horatio explained to me that I could study anything I wanted to study, but that he recommended me to learn more Earth Magic and how to bring it forth at will. He spent some time on meditation techniques, and how to bring laser-sharp focus into my will and that my will would “surge” with power when combined with the correct focus. He said once I had mastered that, then the rest would be relatively straightforward. I asked him about spells and spell books because I just had to know, I was in a magical world after all.

“All in good time” was all that he said on that issue and we moved through the breathing, the relaxing and even at one point a trance state. Once he was satisfied with my ability to put my mind “into the fade” to access and open my “ways” then we took a break and refreshments were brought.



“It is critical that you are able to keep a calm mind while under duress. The speed enhancements and magical surge you used instinctively when rescuing the Elk, and when we were sparring, are internal magic that doesn’t require this level of concentration and focused will. The ease with which you use such magic implies that you have a natural aptitude on how to apply them. When you tried to warm yourself up by heating your blood, you may inadvertently have opened your internal channels accidentally. It is a risky way to do things and according to Grant, you almost killed yourself. In the future, allow the instinctive magic to manifest naturally. I am reluctant to open more way channels within you at the moment. Additional way channels should open up as you increase in skill and ability and your inner mind, what humans call the subconscious mind will compensate accordingly.”

“What you are saying is that I shouldn’t draw high levels of power in my internal magic, but instead use finesse?”

“Exactly! Like the power surge you palmed into me. It was a minor form of the electrical bolt spell, which built up over time, giving it a much greater effect. If you had tried to do the surge immediately without letting the power build, it would have ripped open more of your internal way channels and possibly ruptured you within. The magical pathways inside you are new and unused to power flow. Just one wrong move and you could immolate yourself in a pyre of magical overflow.”

“By waiting until I feel instinctively that the time is right, that is the correct action?”

“Wonderful! You see how intuitively you understand. Perhaps now it is time to try some spells.”

“Great, I have been champing at the bit to get at least one spell done and dusted.”

“Champing? Are you hungry?”

“No, no, forgive me, I used an idiom. It’s an expression meaning I have been waiting a little impatiently.”

“Aha, yes, idioms are a delight within cultural boundaries. We have a few of our own. For example ‘The acorn comes before the tree, and yet the acorn comes from the tree’.”

He smiled at me knowingly as I pondered what he had just said. Was he alluding to the chicken or the egg idiom? I wasn’t sure.

The scholar who had been administering to our culinary needs arrived with a huge pile of books in her arms. Struggling into the booth, she placed them ever so carefully on the table. She curtsied and hurried away as I eyed the books hungrily. The problem with power is its addictiveness. I remember feeling this way the first time I had learned to shoot in the military. The heady excitement as the Platoon Sergeant had drilled us on safe use practices with weapons. Then the corporals had issued just five live bullets each for our rifles. Just five. Five shots downrange and those five bullets were for me the start of a long and illustrious career in the armed forces. Would these books be my five bullets?

# CHAPTER 15

## THE WONDER

Prince Horatio passed me the first book. “What do you make of this one?”

I looked at the cover as I grasped it. Hands trembling. The book was thick, heavy, and imperious. The binding had gilding in an elaborate pattern around the entire cover; ornate and mysterious. The title, too, a mystery. It had an almost Arabic or Hindi style text. The letters extended into the gilded design on the cover, making the script hard to fathom. If it was in the Elvin script, would I be able to read it? All these thoughts rushed through my mind, but the one foremost thought was what it would reveal. What would I learn? Excitement coursing through me, I could almost feel the power in my hands. What secrets would I unravel within? What would I unlock in my mind?

It turned out that the answer to those questions was not much, not much at all. I opened the book to the first page and then flipped through more pages. The aroma of old books filling the booth. It was completely blank. For all its elegance it held no words I could see. Before I could look up accusingly at Horatio he said, “Feel the words, Petros, in your current state you cannot perceive them directly with sight.”

I thought about what he said and then closing my eyes I set my mind into the calm receptive state I had been taught earlier. Then opening them, I looked at the pages again. This time I saw a flickering. It started as a smudge, then, like I was cleaning a dirty window, the page revealed itself to me. The words were not anything I recognized, and the prose contained sigils and what I can only describe as hieroglyphics. It was a step forward. I tried again to make sense of the words.

This time as I focused on the book, it glowed brighter, enveloping my hands as they held it open. The glow spread up my arms and before I could think to release the book; I felt a blinding flash and suddenly a surge of images, gestures, and knowledge flowed into me. It was as if I had been blind and someone had laid hands upon me to restore my sight.

Reeling from the information dump, I dropped the book back onto the table and sat back. My eyes were open, but playing before them was not the room beyond, but instead, a wild array of all those sigils and hieroglyphs. They morphed into words and the words blended into reams of sentences, then blended again, and again, converting chapters into paragraphs and paragraphs into sentences. Sentences eventually condensed into single words, then from many single words they combined to form only one short expression. "Light the way"

Gasping for air, I said the words out loud. "Light the Way".

Immediately, I felt the draw of power from my core and the whole booth lit up in a bright luminous glow. I could feel the drain on my reserves. I was pumping power into the light at a phenomenal rate. The entire booth must have been like a sun within the library. I tried to dim the light, throttle the flow of mana draining out of me and slowly the dark spots of my blinking eyes receded and I could see more clearly. Horatio was looking at me with a bright smile on his face. If being proud could shine, he might have shone as brightly as the light I was projecting.

I was definitely getting the hang of this. And wow, what a rush. Okay, it was just a light spell, but it came from my mind! The convergence of will, internal power, and the correct incantation had made something unbelievable happen. I closed the gates of my way-channel and the light blinked out.

"Now that was a head rush!" I exclaimed eagerly. "Almost everything that has happened to me has caused me excruciating pain, but that has to be one of the best feelings ever. The way the knowledge just flowed into me, it was like... well, I don't actually have words for it. What's next?"

Horatio was already holding out the next book which I grabbed with eager hands but he held onto it and I quickly looked up at him. “This is an offensive spell. Please do not cast it when you have absorbed the knowledge.” He gave me a stern look, and I grinned sheepishly. I was a middle-aged man, and I felt like a teenager again.

“Fair enough, I will contain my exuberance” I responded solemnly, but inside I was as giddy as a school-girl. Whatever this book would teach me, and whatever else I learned I was so looking forward to exerting my full force of will on something. Many something's.

What followed was a steady stream of books. When the first pile finished, the scholar collected them and another pile was brought. All-in-all I learned just about twenty spells before Horatio called it a day. I had them all broiling inside me waiting to be unleashed and I was more than eager to get out from studies and move on to the magic range or whatever they called it. Instead, I was shown via a great deal of stairs to a room that had a pallet for sleeping and a meager but delicious meal of freshly baked bread, a type of butter, a piece of tasty cheese and several leafy vegetable greens that made me ache for home and a delicious hamburger. Sadly, there was no meat. Complementing the flavor was more of the tea we had been drinking earlier and my body eagerly accepted the nutrition. Studying magic was hard, hungry work!

I relaxed back on the pallet after “changing” my clothes to something more pajama-like. As cool as the denim and robe had been, it just pulled in all the wrong places when I lay down. I was eager to go through my character sheet.

Col. Petros Arkansas (Callsign: Armpit)	
Class: PRODIGY	Species: HUMAN
Hit Points (HP): 1700	Mana Points (MP):1900
Attributes:	
Strength:	17

Agility:	17
Intelligence:	19
Wisdom:	19
Stamina:	17
Luck:	15
Constitution:	17

I willed the magical page to show up:

Below the pentagram with the inner spinning Yin-yang symbol a list of known spells had formed. I looked at them admiringly. While many of them were beyond my skill level at the moment, it would just be a matter of time before I could access those powers.

Spell Listing
<b>Light Magic</b>
Light Level 1 - (Level 5 prerequisite) - Incantation: "Light the way"
A 5m radius lighting that glows with the intensity of the amount of mana channeled into it
Light Level 2 - (Level 5 prerequisite) - Incantation: "Light the path"
An arc of lighting that glows with the intensity of the amount of mana channeled into it. Angle of the arc can be adjusted. A wider angle and the effect will diminish less than 5 meters. A narrower angle and the effect will increase beyond 5 meters.
Force Barrier Level 1- (Level 5 prerequisite) - Incantation: "Shield on"

A barrier of magical energy constructed to deflect kinetic energy (Defined and shaped by the amount of energy the caster projects into the barrier).

Force Barrier Level 2- (Level 10 prerequisite) - Incantation: "Barrier shield"

A barrier of magical energy constructed to deflect radiation, kinetic and magical energy (Defined by the amount of mana the caster projects within the barrier).

Healing balm (Does not work on caster)

A healing buff that superficially stops bleeding and heals lacerations, cures bruising and abrasions. Can only be cast while touching the intended target. (Does not work on caster)

Heal and Seal (Level 15 prerequisite)

A healing buff that heals deeply, mending damaged tissue from within. The amount of healing depends on the amount of mana invested. Bone ailments, breaks, fractures, and dismemberment are beyond the scope of this healing spell. Can only be cast while touching the intended target.

Absolute healing (Level 40 prerequisite)

Holistic healing remedy, repairing and dispelling damaged tissue, destroying disease, curing poison and mending bone. Dismemberment is beyond the scope of this healing spell. Can only be cast while touching the intended target.

Cure poison (Level 5 prerequisite)

Curative healing spell that cleanses the body from all foreign ailments. Destroys foreign bodies such as bacteria, virus and fungal infections. Additionally, purges all poisons. Can only be cast while touching the intended target.

Warning: Does not heal the body from the effect of toxins and ailments.

<b>Druid Magic</b>
Tame beast (Prerequisite Level 5)
A calming vibe that endears the animal to your will. If the animal is especially disagreeable or willful, it may not work.
Calm Beast (Prerequisite Level 5)
An euphoric sensation that will confuse and in some instances endear an animal to your will. This spell should be used on an aggressive animal in order to distract it while you make your getaway.
Vicious vines (Limited to plants less than 10 earth years of age)
Allows the caster to manipulate plants branches to stab and rend at foes. Duration depends on willpower and mana investment.
Animate plant (Limited to plants less than 10 earth years of age)
Allows the caster to manipulate a plant entirely. It will uproot and move to attack foes relentlessly. Duration depends on willpower and mana investment.
Plant Grow (Limited to plants less than two earth years of age)
A growth spurt on plants allowing them to grow at a prodigious pace. Allows plants to grow beyond their usual size. The growth continues based on the mana invested.
<b>Fire Magic</b>
Fire flare (Effective range within 50 meters)
A sparkling flare that can either be used for illumination or offensive strikes. The burning flare effect continues for 10 seconds after being cast.
Fireball (Prerequisite Level 5 - Affective range within 100 meters)



The magical fireball is a 30-centimeter diameter ball of molten fire that upon impact bursts to a radius of 3 meters. Everything within the radius of the damage zone will receive equal amounts of raw magical and burning damage for a duration of 5 to 10 seconds. Damage depends on the amount of mana invested.

### **Air Magic**

Lesser Lightning Level 1 (Prerequisite Level 5 - Effective range within 30 meters)

A single arc of lightning directed by willpower. Easily grounded and requires an agile mind to control effectively.

Lesser Lightning Level 2 (Prerequisite Level 10 - Effective range within 50 meters)

Multiple arcs of lightning directed by willpower. Damage enhanced by the amount of mana used to generate the combined effect.

Deadly Lightning (Prerequisite Level 40 - Effective range within 200 meters)

Single deadly and unerringly accurate bolt of lightning cast upon a single target within a 200m range. Magically changing the targets static ionic state and creating a potential difference with the sky above create the effect. This potential difference causes the bolt to materialize and smite the object of your desire. High willpower improves the casting time to a shorter duration. Can only be cast in open skies.

Wind - (Prerequisite Level 5)

Powerful breeze used to stir the leaves of trees or flutter sails that have gone limp. A draining spell of immense power that has a 20-meter front. Duration depends on mana expenditure

Gale force - (Prerequisite Level 40)

Turbulent gust of wind that can unbalance foes, knock over trees and disrupt forward advances. It has also been used to fuel fires to new heights. Varies based on terrain, mana expenditure and the experience of the caster.
<b>Aqua Magic</b>
Sterilize water - Cleanse
A pulse of magical force that destroys all life within a body of water making it sterile and thus safe to drink. Limited in scope to 10 liters maximum. Effective twice per day.
Condense a jug (Prerequisite Level 5)
A jug of water condensed from the air. Cool and refreshing. Effective once per day.
Ripple pulse (Prerequisite Level 15)
A pulse of water force used to subdue turbulent waves, disrupt floating objects, or propel a floating object. Limited in area of effect and scope.

I looked at all the various types of magic I had learned, and the corresponding corner of the magical pentagon glowed. So as I looked at the Druid magic list, the green Earth magic corner glowed and similarly the blue corner for Aqua magic. What I noticed was that I had something called Life magic, which seemed to affect the inner Yin-Yang symbol. The white part of the interlocking tear shapes seemed to glow. This led me to the conclusion that there were seven magical schools: Life and Dark were perhaps a combination of the outer five magic's. I had yet to learn any magic from the dark side, and any from the metal side. I would have to ask Horatio about those in the morning. It was with these thoughts swirling through my mind that I at last, closed my eyes to enjoy a peaceful and restful sleep.

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# CHAPTER 16

## A MISSION REVEALED

I awoke to the smell of apple cinnamon. It wasn't my all-time favorite smell, but it was right up there with them. It was a heartwarming scent and reminded me of days past when as orphans we had been invited to rich people's homes to enjoy Christmas morning with them. Apple cinnamon Danish Pastries were often the main course for breakfast. Sometimes we were invited to join them for lunch too if we had not burned out their enthusiasm for orphans by that time. Good memories mostly and good times.

As I suspected there were a few pastries that had been placed on a platter at the foot of the pallet, awaiting my attention. I ate them with relish and wondered what was in store for me today. It was still dark outside my window, with a faint glow where the rising sun was about to make its appearance. I had to remind myself that I was an avatar here in this real world. A strange reversal of recent times.

Before I could dwell on that, Horatio arrived, and he ushered me out my room, along a passage and back across a bridge high in the tree to the library. I hadn't realized it, but I had spent the night in the palace.

"Those were very plain rooms for a palace." I mentioned offhandedly.

"Plain and unadorned is what you mean Petros, and please don't take it the wrong way, but those were the servant's quarters. In fact, the guest rooms for our servant's guests. We are keeping you at a relatively low profile. There will be a time when you can come and go into the palace proper, but until then, we must play these games as my father dictates."

I realized that while the king had shown me a modicum of respect and thrown all his hopes at my feet, he still did not believe in, nor trust me. A sentiment I could well understand. Especially as the man had lost his

daughter and the cause of her loss was being attributed to a human. Specifically, a human prodigy.

“Can you tell me about this Prodigy who caused your sister to be captured?”

We were walking upstairs now, seeming to go higher and higher up the tree. I guessed instinctively that I wouldn't be learning from books today. Instead, we would put what I had learned to use.

“His name is Alfred Malabourne. He has been fighting for our cause for many years. His skills are legendary and a lot of them thanks to my people, and especially thanks to my sister, who took him on as a personal project.”

“Like you have taken me on?”

“No. Not the same. Mala, as he has come to be known is from the United Kingdom, an Englishman who like you and all the others who fight with us, is an ex-Special Forces serviceman. He was not well liked initially by many, and according to my sister, was completely misunderstood. He became somewhat of an icon in the ASS. Excelling at infiltration. His missions caused untold damage to the Reaper FOP's (forward observation post) and gave them severe headaches in their incessant process of searching out new sapient life to subdue and subsume.”

“When he went missing on a solo reconnaissance mission a few months back, my sister led another team to retrieve him. I guess she reasoned that as the last living prodigy, it was important that we recovered him. Sadly, the Reapers predicted a rescue mission would come and so captured my sister and her team. They went dark barely 10 days ago. We have lost track of them and my father is at a loss. Her rescue mission it turned out was unsanctioned, and it broke my father's heart because she went against his wishes. He did not take into account my sisters' resolve and dedication to her Prodigy pupil. Nor her stupidity. Youthfulness brings brashness as I am sure you are aware.”

I took a moment to consider what Horatio had just said. Firstly that his sister, the Princess of the Elves was MIA (Missing in action) and secondly,

the only other living Prodigy was also MIA. I was still the new guy on the block, so I kept quiet, waiting for Horatio to continue, smiling ruefully because I really didn't like the idea that as a member of ASS, I had to excel at infiltration. The ASS acronym had to go. If we were to be taken seriously, we had to take ourselves seriously too and with statements like that we were (for want of a better word) "invading" Monty Python and Mr. Bean territory.

Horatio was brooding again, and I tried to lighten the mood by getting back on topic. "How are you different?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, how is it different you taking me on, versus your sister taking on Malabourne?"

"Oh. Well, firstly she didn't give him VIP treatment, although she warmed to him after some time, and he has yet to see the sacred city as you have. His cruel streak kept us from revealing too much beyond what was necessary to further his abilities."

He had revealed far more than he intended with his comments. I could surmise that Mala was probably a tough SOB like most of us military types. Second, he was one of those lone wolf types who preferred to trust themselves rather than others. Not ideal at leading teams, but good enough to keep the job, and great at getting the job done no matter the cost to life or limb. I had a phase like that during my Afghanistan deployment. The job had been all I was about. I had subsequently learned to rely on others, but just barely. What helped was my innate empathy. If I ever lost that, I would have become a monster. I hoped Mala was not at monster stage yet. I was beginning to get a picture of Mala and wished he were around to help my transition into this crazy lifestyle. It would be great to get ahead for a change rather than continually running to catch up.

We had reached the top of the tree; by far the tallest two trees in the entire world and as far as my eyes could see the massive forest stretched out far below and into the distance. Beyond it, I could see the large open plains

of grasslands surrounding the forest, which became hills and then mountains tipped with snow. There were several more forest clumps out to the east amongst some hills with one at the very edge of the land as it appeared to meet a wide body of water, probably an ocean.

To the north, west, and south the plains stretched to the massive mountain range creating a horseshoe shape around this exquisite landscape. So reminiscent of Earth and yet so different.

The white clouds tussled and toyed in the sky like fluffy candy-floss. The cool refreshing breeze brushing the leaves as it moved them across the sky. The sun shone down with a pleasant golden glow, warming my chilled exposed skin.

“Right! What are we doing up here?” I enquired, unable to hold back my excitement. I wanted to start using some of these spells I had learned.

Horatio beckoned me to the edge of a platform and indicated a large branch that extended out. There appeared to be a translucent barrier around the far end of the branch. Some manikins were mounted and some flat panels with targets painted on them. This was definitely the shooting range.

“Your offensive spells should be targeted towards those manikins. The barrier beyond will protect the rest of our world should you miss. You may begin after you have conducted the calming exercises and you have your focus finely honed.”

While we were talking, some soldiers had moved up behind us and the lead sergeant appeared to be waiting to speak to Horatio. I settled down and began the breathing mantra as he went about his business.

No sooner had I settled into the quiet of my mind and moved the flow of magic through my body when I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. It was Horatio. He quickly excused himself saying he had to attend to something but that one of the soldier’s would accompany me until his return. He introduced a thin-faced man in a brown robe, with a small sunburst insignia on his lapels. Introducing himself as Journeyman Robert, he stepped back, and I continued my prep.

The next few hours were extremely frustrating as I tried to channel consistently into my fire flare spell, fireball spell, and lesser lightning. The

lightning spell being the most difficult to control as I just couldn't seem to aim it.

Every time I shot it off, it would arc to anything within three meters of its forward flight. Journeyman Robert patiently explained that lightning by its nature, is unstable and that I should focus less energy into the spell, reducing its voltage and thus allow it to be more accurate over longer distances.

Eventually, I began to get the hang of it and after my third mana potion had run dry along with my internal mana, J.B. took me aside and we began recovery drills. The slow drills were similar to Tai Chi Chuan mixed with Yoga. Tai Chi Chuan is a Chinese martial art I had practiced only fleetingly but when applied with the breathing and focus drills, it seemed to increase my mana regeneration prodigiously.

It was all coming along smoothly when Horatio returned and asked me to resume firing at the targets. He then called up a wind, which caused both the platform we were on to sway and the branch with the targets to vibrate annoyingly, making it even harder for my spells to strike home. Once I had depleted all my mana again, we began on the movement drills. He had been distant since his return and I guessed he had something on his mind.

"My father is not well Petros," he eventually spoke out. "He collapsed in the main throne room this morning, which is why the guards fetched me."

"Oh no, is he okay?" I enquired concerned. The King had been abrupt to me, but as the leader of the Elves and Horatio's father no less, I could lend a sympathetic ear.

"This business of Adrianna is eating him from within. He just hasn't been the same since she was taken."

"I can imagine, it's an awful situation to be in. Is there no way to recover her?"

Horatio stopped mid-movement and turned to face me, bringing the exercises to an end.



“You are the only one Petros. Us Elves, we cannot go near those blighted lands. Our aura is too bright, too alive. We are almost always discovered, and it never goes well for us away from our homeland. Our source of power stems from here.” He indicated the tree below us. “I just don’t know what she was thinking of by going after Mala.”

I kept quiet, watching his inner frustrations build.

Eventually I said, “Show me how a real mage can shoot.” This seemed to perk him up and moving to the end of the platform, he made a flourish and a flick with an utterance and suddenly ten sizzling lesser lightning bolts crackled, one from each of his ten fingers. Each targeted a separate manikin. He did this several times, the cooldown between simultaneous casts spanning only half a minute. Then he conjured a large fireball he judged to perfection, arcing it to land squarely in the center of the targeted platform with a whomp and an echoing crack as the whole platform ignited and then whatever counterspells were in place seemed to suck the air out of the burning platform to leave it smoking and yet ready for the next attack. This time the cooldown was longer, spanning a full two minutes before he shot the next. It was truly a spectacular display of mastery in something I was only at the very edge of understanding.

Clapping my hands in applause I said, “Now doesn’t that feel better?” Like guys anywhere, wanton destruction always makes us feel better. We both grinned at each other and practiced even more intensively. It was a day of giddy heights for me and equally frustrating lows.

As the day passed and turned to evening, I was at last satisfied with my offensive spells. I could hit what I was aiming at and control the strength and duration of their effect. Fireball being the most destructive of the spells I could caste but having the least control on direct damage within an area.

Horatio then took us to an inner chamber which at the very highest level of the tree had a magnificent view of the stadium shaped library far below, within the hollowed-out tree. We moved onto a platform where an enormous emerald crystal was mounted like a chandelier above us. A magical boundary seemed to originate from the green jewel surrounding the edges of the platform. I had the impression that the platform hung from the

crystal. There were several barrier bridges linking the outer shell of the tree to the inner platform, allowing us to walk towards it.

“Within this place is our research laboratory and training platform. It is controlled within the sphere of the lodestone itself. Before you ask, the lodestone is a crystal structure that embodies this world’s Druid magic. It is the Emerald crystal you can see suspended above us. It is the source of our greatest power and is treasured by our people above and beyond anything you could possibly imagine. If we had a God, then it/He/She would be the Lodestone. Each living world has one or many, depending on the richness of that world.”

I looked up at the crystal structure embedded within the top of the tree. It glowed dully, but it thrummed with power. I felt a little uneasy staring at it. It gave me the feeling I was looking at something radioactive and I wanted to get a lead wall between myself and it.

“It is one of five such crystals within our realm. The other races each control one and together we hold dominion over this land. These are things of little interest to you though. The point I want to make is that magic doesn’t just come from nowhere; It has a source and a connection to the land itself. The more healthy and productive a land is, the better the quality of magic that can be found. Within our realm, all five have caretakers and ensure that the source crystals are unpolluted and maintained. All five races have pledged such and continue to uphold the Covenant of Illuminous.”

“Who or what are the other races?” I asked, wondering if I had guessed right.

“Why, they are the Dwarves, the Orcs, the Plains Elves and the Merfolk. We are, as you know, the Elder Elves. It is our duty to embrace Druid Magic and the Emerald crystal and keep them safe.”

“The Dwarves are metal workers and miners of great renown, and they guard the Mercurial crystal deep in their labyrinths within the earth. They can be found in the mountain ranges to the south, which are said to be rich in ore. Unlike the other crystals, the metal crystal is made of living molten metal.”

“The Orcs are a cantankerous race, but extremely fierce. They have the Ruby Fire crystal and live high in the mountains where earth and sky combine to form fire. The crystal resides in one of the volcanoes out to the west.”

“The Plains Elves are our closest distant cousins. More bulky in girth, stronger appearing and resilient, they are the wardens of the Air Crystal and cherish the wide-open plains to be found throughout the realm. They are nomadic and the whereabouts of the Saffron crystal are not easy to discern.”

“Lastly, the Merfolk who can take on any living shape when upon land, are a vicious and cruel people. These fish people keep the blue Sapphire crystal hidden within the depths of the ocean.”

“We all share a common ancestor called the Aevish, our contact with the various crystals has changed us over the eons. Our close link to the various magic has altered our shape, form, and function. With each passing age, we evolve further apart but our goal is united. We keep the crystals safe, we study the magic and we share the knowledge amongst each other, despite our differences or grievances. We are bound by the Covenant of Illuminous.” Horatio turned to face me and pressed his hand on my shoulder.

“But I digress, the reason I bring you here to our laboratory is to give you a safe place to practice your other magic skills. Within the laboratory, we will expose you to different scenarios to allow you to develop those skills. I regret I cannot accompany you as I have pressing duties. Journeyman Robert will assist you with whatever you need.”

We had reached the platform and as we passed through the barrier surrounding it. I saw Journeyman Bob waiting for us within. It was a large area, not dissimilar to a sports field, with a walking track seeming to extend all the way around the platform allowing one to look out over the edge of the platform down to the library far below. Upon the platform were rooms separated by barriers of various colors and translucency, which obscured my view of what to expect.

I looked back to Horatio as he continued, “I will not see you for a while, it has been a pleasure to get to know you and I wish you good luck in your training. You will return to your Sim early tomorrow. The spells I have given you will more than assist you through the various Sims that Grant has in store for you. All I ask is that you be true to yourself and honor your values. The rewards will be great, and perhaps we will have a chance to rescue my sister and her wayward pupil in the not too distant future.” He reached out his hand awkwardly, and I grasped it in earnestness.

“If it is within my power, I will help you all that I can.” I stated simply, giving a sincere look of gratitude to Horatio. With that, we parted, and I turned to Bob.

“Hey J.B. what’s next?”

Internally, I was cataloging all the information Horatio had told me. This was only brushing the surface of his peoples’ history and origins, something inside me felt compelled to know more. It was startling that so many human legends were in fact real. That humans might have Elvish blood, myself included, was enlightening, and I thought about all the conspiracy theories I knew of about Atlantis, the Pyramids, the Aztecs, Bigfoot and the Holy Grail. How much ‘seeding’ had the Absinthe done to our world?

Bob was looking at me quizzically and I realized that he probably didn’t know that on Earth his shortened name was Bob. Before he could ask, I explained, and we moved off to a vacant room on the platform. There he showed me how to use all the level 5 spells I had learned. From healing spells to cure poison, to sterilize water. Each required an incantation and a modicum of mana. The most essential ingredient of all making everything work was focus and will. I endeavored to temper mine and improve my focus every chance I got.

It was late when eventually J.B. showed me back to my pallet.

“In the morning I will escort you to the waypoint. Please be ready at sunrise.”

Despite my overtures at friendship towards the thin elf, he had maintained a steady stoicism and distance from my banter. I felt I liked the grim-faced man; He was all business and professional. Despite that, I couldn't help but push his buttons.

"Thanks J.Bob, catch you in the morning" my smile was genuine but I couldn't decide if I was smiling at his brief flinch for my blatant familiarity or if I was simply smiling in pleasantries.

The morning came and shortly after dawn I found myself on the field where I had first appeared in this land. I saw a golden orb floating exactly where I had originally materialized. J.B. explained that all I had to do was to grasp the orb and I would be back in the chilly Frigid Zone. I took one last look around. Noticing that the calf I had brought with me was nowhere to be seen, I wondered what had happened to it. Maybe it too had been sent back, or maybe it had dissolved into the ether. Sure, it was a construct, but even so, I was a construct here. I still felt and cared about what happened to me. I hoped the Elves had taken care of it. With that thought, I took a deep breath of the fresh tropical air and grasped the orb.

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# CHAPTER 17

## QUEST COMPLETE

My exhale was less comfortable. The cold slammed into me. I found myself standing below the tree where I had met Horatio in his bird form, while the wolves had been feasting. The hind's gristly remains had frozen solid while time had passed and the wolves had eaten their fill and moved on. Horatio had said he would pause the Sim though, or at least slowed it down somewhat. Only a couple of hours had passed since I was last here, at the most.

The pellet that the owl had regurgitated was glowing golden beside me. I mentally adjusted my clothing to suit the new environment, felt the slight draw on my mana and then it was done. Wearing the right gear in cold conditions cannot be overstated. I had a much more cheery outlook on accomplishing this Sim with my new arsenal of spells and knowledge. I stooped to pick up the golden pellet and immediately a pop-up box appeared.

<b>Mini-quest:</b> Saving the Elk's Calf, Part 2 completed
By studying with the Elder Elves for a time, you have been equipped with an abundance of knowledge. How will you use it?
Quest Complete. You have received a Ring of Storing You have received a Staff of Illuminous upgrade You have received a Cloak of Darkness You have received Boots of Stealth
Select Yes to equip them now? Y/N

(If you select no, the items will be kept within the Ring of Storing and can be equipped once you wear the ring and call them forth.)

I selected YES and found myself the proud new owner of a dark auburn cloak which seemed to have a surreal living quality about it. The sheen had a velvety texture with rivulets of red veins streaming throughout, each thread grasping actively at shadows and pulling them ever deeper within.

Wearing it, I felt my vision obscured slightly as if I had passed from standing in sunshine to huddling within a dark shadow. It was similar to wearing a gillie-suit but not nearly so constricting.

Upon my feet were two brand new boots. Similar to what I had worn throughout my military career, but these had craftsmanship unlike anything I had ever seen. The leather was thin, supple, and they had a dull sheen. There were no shoelaces, velcro or buckles. They simply conformed to my feet like a good pair of loafers. Yet the suede feel and texture seemed to rebuff the snow I was standing in without absorbing it. I stamped my feet to get a better feel of them and heard barely a whisper as my feet connected with the compact snow beneath. Taking the test further I kicked at the tree trunks about me and heard more noise from the shuddering branches and dropping clumps of snow than from where my kicks had landed. These were definitely magical stealth boots.

Upon my right index finger sat a plain black ring carved out of solid stone or metal. It wasn't shiny, instead, it seemed to suck up light and if I held my hand up it appeared as if my digit was severed and levitating slightly above the stump. Concentrating I felt the ring with my mind and could discern it was an empty void. Somehow it had been crafted as an empty space that needed filling.

Experimentally I willed my boots, cloak and staff within it, then willed them back out. With this gear, I was smiling like I had won the jackpot. How cool was this to be fitted with such items? I was so OP (overpowered), the rewards for this were out of this world.

Lastly, I looked at my trusty staff. The prompt had said it was an upgrade. It looked exactly the same and yet felt more solid, weightier. Perhaps it had metal inserted within it. I willed it to morph into my favorite

Katana and with a slight drain on my mana it changed. Although this time I could definitely feel the weight of the sword was different. Not unbalanced, but definitely heavier than I recalled. I willed it back to staff form and tried to look at it with my mind. What I found within took my breath away.

Five jewels, each as big as my thumbnail had been inserted within the structure of the staff. They were the five colors of magic. If I had to guess their function, it would be that the gems were repositories of magical mana to enhance my own magical abilities. How much and for how long they could help me I had no idea but the gem fragments were large and so I guessed they would contain fairly large mana reserves. Intuitively, I tapped into them and gasped aloud as each contained 5000 mana. I wasn't just OP, I was MegaOP. I would have to thank Prince Horatio when I saw him again. These gifts were more than I had ever wanted or expected.

It also left me thinking about my mission and what I had to accomplish. These gifts, like the gifts from the Absinthe, had strings attached. I would have to make sure I delivered on my end.

So began my journey to conquer Canada Sim. Over the next few days, I made my way around and over the mountain that had been obscuring the beacon. Each day I reveled in the discoveries in how to push my magic further and use it in more complicated ways. It was lonely though, and I often wished there was someone I could share the discoveries with or just shout joyously together with someone to celebrate in my accomplishments.

I tried communicating with Grant a few times and while he seemed enthusiastic. I felt as if he was always distracted, and so I didn't get the sense of camaraderie I had experienced with Horatio or any of the other people from the ASS unit. I also spend a lot of time thinking about what other name we could give ourselves that didn't paint us as a foolish outfit. Not that I had anything against donkeys; it was just that as a tactical intergalactic military force; We had no business confusing people with our acronyms.

The terrain was difficult and challenging, and the predators within the Sim were definitely on the prowl. I met a few brown bears which I calmed with a Calm Beast spell and left them to their own devices, a wolf pack



decided I was dinner one night but a few Fire flares and a Fireball left them in no doubt that dinner was best served rare, and preferably any place but where I was.

I ate mostly rabbit caught the old-fashioned snare way and had a few partridges I shot down on the wing but found that the lightning spell overcooked them and the fireball spell left nothing worth eating. The cure poison spell came in handy after eating some berries that disagreed with me, however all-in-all it was a good time to get my thoughts in order and become accustomed to my new abilities. At last on the sixth day, I reached the crest of a hill and found a large rock that my inner compass had been directing me towards. With a wistful look around the magnificent landscape, I reached out a hand and found myself transported directly to the level up room.

A tone reverberated throughout the room. Ding, Ding, Ding!

You have leveled up!
You have leveled up!
You have leveled up!

...this continued and at the end of the notifications, I was now at level 14.

You have reached level 14. Your diligence, your search for truth, and your steadfast approach to challenges have improved all your skills across the board. Each skill will increase between 3 to 5 points, depending on their use. In addition, you have acquired new skills.
--

Animal Husbandry
Caring for critters has costly demands, but as this skill improves, perhaps you will find the rewards you seek. Starting skill Level 10. Increased to level 13.

### Alchemy

An interest in the world around you has enhanced your ability to identify animal and plant life constituents. You are more able to combine these items to create something advantageous and beneficial, or detrimental and destructive. Starting skill level 6. Increased to level 11.

### Lucid Languages

An ability to communicate in multiple languages. This talent will grow as you meet new languages.

### Weapon Specialization

Your chosen weapon appears to be the Katana. Your previous knowledge and training combined with its abundant use in your current training regime has brought this skill to the fore. Increased to level 17.

\*Take note: You have been limited to 3 weapon slots - use them wisely

Inwardly I sighed, I knew this was an ever-changing list of skills that tried to attribute points to depict abilities I had gained. It was tedious that almost every single skill had to be listed and individually tallied. How would I ever be able to select skills and upgrade them according to what I needed? It seemed as if the points were attributed automatically though. The prompts continued:

You have magical skill points to distribute. Would you like to add them now?

Y/N

The words “Magical skill points” were highlighted and so when I looked at them more intensely a pop-up appeared with a description:

Magical skill/attribute points are a numerical value of your ability within each area of magical craft.

I was quite surprised that I had leveled up nine levels since Nico Sim. It had been a steep learning curve, but I had had a lot of help along the way. I would have to discuss this situation with Grant. I didn’t want to be given the streamlined version of training just for the expediency of the situation. It was not my intention to shirk any of the challenges and I wanted to get the most benefit I could in any given Sim that could translate into real life benefits.

I looked at the avatar I had become in the Level-up room. The figure no longer pulsed from one type of class to another to signify a Prodigy. Instead, it was a replica of myself as I was now. Denims, cloak, boots. Beneath the cloak was a down parka jacket. The eye of Horus symbol pulsed goldenly on my forehead. I really hoped it wasn’t visible on my real forehead. I reached for the pillar before the effigy and as my hand conformed to the handle, the pentagon symbol appeared. All this time in the back of my mind I had been wondering why it was a pentagon instead of a pentagram, but then realized that the pentagram would interfere with the yin-yang symbol within the pentagon. So I guessed it was an issue of functionality over form.

Each corner of the pentagon had the color corresponding to the five colors of magic. At those corners was a number, which I guessed was my ability score in that particular magic school. Additionally, within the yin-yang symbol were other numbers. The white tear, the black tear shape and each dot within those tears had a number. It was all quite confusing. Below the pictogram was the list of spells I knew and since nothing had changed there, I focused on the pictogram of the pentagon. Willing it to form a list. With a swirl and a chime, it adjusted to my preference. I loved this interface. Windows and Apple could learn a lot from these guys, I thought wistfully.

**Fire (Red Ruby Lodestone affinity)**

Fire is the essence of combustion. Fire magic will spring from this font.
Your fire magical skill has been enhanced from 0 to level 13
<b>Nature (Green Emerald Lodestone affinity)</b>
Nature is the essence of growth. Natural Druid magic will spring from this font.
Your Druid magical skill has been enhanced from level 0 to level 11
<b>Air (Saffron Lodestone affinity)</b>
The Air is the essence of gas and weather cycles. Air magic will spring from this font.
Your Air skill has been enhanced from level 0 to level 8
<b>Aqua (Blue Sapphire Lodestone affinity)</b>
Water is the essence of life, Aqua magic will spring from this font.
Your Aqua magical skill has been enhanced from level 0 to level 7
<b>Metal (Mercurial Lodestone affinity)</b>
Metal is the essence of resilience. Metal, mining, power and forge Magic will spring from this font.
Metal is the essence of resilience. Metal, mining and forge Magic will spring from this font
Your metal power magic has been enhanced from level 0 to level 3

--

<b>Secondary Tier Magics</b>
<b>Light Magic (External)</b>
A unique combination of the five primary magical elements. Healing magic springs from this font.
Your light magic ability has been enhanced from level 0 to level 10
<b>Light Magic (Internal)</b>
An intuitive combination of the five primary magical elements based exclusively on internal mana pool size and willpower. There are no definitive spells within the realm of your mind, only results. Your intelligence and wisdom feature strongly in this ability.
Your Internal light magical ability has been enhanced from level 0 to level 25.
<b>Dark Magic (External)</b>
Dark magic is a powerful and in some places forbidden ability that concerns the realm of death and the energies associated with pain and rituals in the world around you. It combines the five primary elements as well as the sixth element of magical properties called the dark or shadow.
Your dark magical ability has been enhanced from level 0 to level 3.
<b>Dark Magic (Internal)</b>
An intuitive combination of all primary magic's that concerns the realm of death and the energies associated with pain and suffering internally. During your life you have met with much suffering and pain. Your ability to harness it internally and manipulate the outcome will increase this ability.
Your Internal dark magical ability has been enhanced from level 0

to level 6

After reading through the list, a notification chimed, and a voice rang out.

You have reached the Apprentice level in Light Magic (Internal).  
Congratulations!

The notifications continued:

You have leveled up nine levels, thus accruing 18 skill points to distribute across your magical levels plus an additional bonus of 15 magical skill points for reaching Apprentice level in one of the Secondary Tier magic.

Please note that Secondary Tier Levels cost two points per skill level.

I willed the superfluous explanations away to see the raw data.

Tier 1 Magical ability	
Fire	13
Nature	11
Air	8
Aqua	7
Metal	3
Tier 2 Magical ability	
Light (External)	10

Light (Internal)	25
Dark (External)	3
Dark (Internal)	6
Points to distribute: 18 (+Bonus 15 points) Total 33 (*Note: Tier 2 magic requires 2 points per level)	

I thought about the spells I knew and what would be useful in various environments. If I had more of a choice, I would learn more offensive spells. You just can't have enough firepower. On the other hand, more powerful spells meant more mana drain. I was lacking in the Metal magical skills and the Dark magical skills. Both of which could prove useful. Especially considering that the enemy would most likely be students of dark energy, it would be a good idea to know what they could do.

I thought about it for a while and did some adjustments. Realizing that I didn't have enough to balance out my scores much, so I tried to be tricky and take a gamble to see if it worked. I adjusted Fire to level 25 in the hope to get an additional 15 points bonus for reaching Apprentice level and ding-ding, sure enough, it awarded me not the 15 points I expected, but 10 points. I had given 12 points to Fire and now had an additional 10 points, giving me a total of 31 points to distribute. It turned out I got less because Tier 1 is not as difficult to level up as Tier 2.

I took some more time to distribute the points. While the gamble hadn't worked out exactly as I wanted, it did give me some extra points to play with. At last satisfied with the changes and the fact that I had not been given any pain during the process I had a last glance over the table:

Tier 1 Magical ability	
Fire	25
Nature	15
Air	15

Aqua	11
Metal	11

Tier 2 Magical ability	
Light (External)	10
Light (Internal)	25
Dark (External)	5
Dark (Internal)	8
Your abilities have been adjusted. Logout Y/N?	

I chose yes and darkness shrouded my vision. Only to appear in my prison upon Grant's alien ship.



# CHAPTER 18

## FREEDOM

As the whitewashed walls came into focus, I felt a crazy sense of vertigo. In my mind, Grant intoned, “Please relax Petros, this won’t take long.”

“What are you doing to me, Grant?” I enquired, trying to keep calm. I had had way too many bad experiences in this position to feel comfortable with any new sensations.

“You will be glad to know that you can come off the table and walk around free of constraints in a few minutes” I sensed Grant's enthusiasm and also noticed that the pipe that usually fed me directly into my stomach was no longer present. Additional tubes that must have dealt with my waste were also no longer attached. After a while, I felt movement and then gravity as I was swung from a horizontal position to a vertical one.

“Please step off the platform, be aware that you may feel dizzy, but it will pass.” instructed Grant.

I craned my neck and found I could move. My neck and body were responding to me. It was the newly enhanced body and nothing like the elder middle-aged man I had been when they first abducted me. Excited at my unexpected freedom I stumbled off the platform and found the gravity to be lighter than expected. That didn’t stop me stumbling to my knees and intuitively I summoned my staff to support me. Exactly as in the Sim, it appeared. I hadn’t believed that magic could work in the real until now. I clothed myself in a t-shirt and camo pants with a thought. Boots and cloak followed, and I turned around to look at the environment that had enslaved me since I left Earth.

Grant was standing at a doorway. He was taller than me, lanky, skinny, and buck-naked. His grey moist-looking skin seemed to glisten in the stark laboratory light. His torso appeared to be extra long, with the ribs showing through as if he had spent time in Ethiopia. Stringy arms and legs lead to four digits, the four digits seemed to form two pairs that acted together, giving the hands and feet the appearance of pincers. His genitalia seemed to be absent as if he never had any, which immediately made me consider his gender or if it was even applicable. The large upside-down pear shaped head with compound eyes, nose slits, and purple lips were the typical looks expected of aliens. One I was familiar with. I guess some of those UFO stories must have been true. The door was open leading to a corridor behind him. Within the room were all the tools you would expect in a dentist or plastic surgeon's office, except that the platform I had been lying on was made of a force field and was translucent. Grant beckoned to me to walk out the door. Every fiber in my being wanted to conjure my sword and chop him to bits. It was with considerable effort I resisted the urge and fought my repulsion of Grant's appearance. He had been good to me but I owed him at least a punch to the face. The electric pulses he had used to gain my compliance, in the beginning, were not easily forgotten. I had to behave myself. I still had a lot to learn and discover.

I adjusted my walk to compensate for the low gravity, making small steps and trying not to use too much force as I stepped. I noticed as I passed Grant that he had a silver ring on his one finger that had a glowing red setting that was facing inwards to his palm, making it easy for him to press by closing his fingers should he have a need. He was poised to press it.

I smiled at him and using thought speak said, "Is that the kill switch?"

"Not a kill switch, but an immobilizer should you be unstable." His honest reply caught me off guard. I was expecting him to make an excuse, but he was being consistently honest with me. I kept walking into the corridor.

"Where to?"

“Walk to the end of the passage and at the fork go left, although I suggest you cloth yourself in something more formal.” Grant followed me, his gait like a spider, each step careful and strange.

With a thought and a gentle tug on my mana I clothed myself in denim and a polo shirt. I then followed the directions and passed several doorways, all closed. Eventually coming to a doorway at the end of the left passage.

“Place your palm on the interface and it will give you access” I did as Grant's mental prompt suggested and with a swish, the door like an iris opened and I entered a spacious room with a large group of humans and Absinthe sitting and lounging around in various places.

“This is the relaxation room where your people gather to socialize and relax. You may mingle freely and refreshments and various food items are available along the wall at the back. I will be here for a short while before I attend my duties. When you are ready to go back to your training, reach out to me with your mind.” I felt his mind recede from our connection and he left me on my own at the threshold.

I was feeling like the new kid on the block again and had no idea where to turn. Hardly anyone took notice of me as I moved tentatively into the room, so I made straight for the back wall. When in doubt, hit the buffet I thought to myself.

One of the first things I made for was the coffee machine. The smell of coffee was strong and proved irresistible. They even had cream and little sugar cubes. It was a 5-star service, and those snacks looked so good. I grabbed some pastries and a couple of sausage rolls.

“There he is!” said a voice I recognized, and I turned to see Raúl Sánchez pushing his way through the crowd towards me. “Come on Colonel. Come sit with us.”

I followed him while stuffing one of the pastries into my salivating maw and found the team all gathered around a table. Different bottles of alcohol were in various states of depletion, including a bottle of Absinthe, a bottle

of Scotch and the merriest of them all, Tequila. The slices of lime, shot glasses, and a salt dispenser spoke of some hard drinking. I looked at my coffee and felt conflicted. The situation demanded something stronger, but the smell and taste of something familiar and comforting had the strongest pull.

After swallowing the pastry with relish and pushing the flakes that had gathered on my unshaven stubbly face I exclaimed, “Hugo!” The huge Norwegian was slumped in a comfortable lounge chair. He looked at me with a somewhat inebriated grin. His rosy face beaming in happiness.

“Armpit Colonel!” he greeted back. Stone, Sánchez, John and Charlie all tipped their glasses to me and threw back another shot.

“Welcome Colonel to our Officers deck,” said Stone. I slurped my coffee noisily and with relish. It was the first time I had imbibed something in reality since my capture. Let me tell you that first sip was heavenly washing down those last flakes of the crispy pastry. The earthy dark aromas of the coffee, enhanced by the fat from the cream, gave me a small shudder of appreciation. My eyes might have even closed for a second, transported down memory lane of moments past where coffee usually meant the end of a difficult mission or a quiet solitary moment of luxury. The slam of several shot glasses on the table brought me back to the moment. Sánchez was leaning towards me and I caught the last part of what he said “....level are you now?”

“I’m up to level 14 at the moment. When did you guys get back?”

John was busy pouring himself another dram of Scotch whiskey while he answered me. “The mission went well. Although at the end there it nearly went to hell. All thanks to Major Stone, we made it out with the objective complete. Sánchez you cocky bastard, you nearly killed me with that stunt you pulled.”

Charlie rose to Sánchez defense, putting his arm around the diminutive Latino. “You limeys always got some beef with the details. We made it, stop complaining.”

John laughed. "I'm not a limey Charlie. You know I'm from New York. I'm as American as you are."

"Americans only come from Texas bud and ONLY drink Tequila." was Charlie's profound reply, "Now drink up man, drink up and let's sing the best song known to man..." He cleared his throat and in his deep southern accent broke out into said song:

"Silver wings upon their chest.  
These are men, America's best.  
One hundred men we'll test today,  
but only three win the Green Beret!..."

Some other soldiers in the room, perhaps also Green Beret's joined in and the slow cadence and catchy rhythm got me tapping my feet to the classic song, a big smile stretched across my face. A group of Russian soldiers, probably Spetznaz judging by the style of uniform they wore were sitting across from us and started singing one of their songs and it soon became a contest of who could shout loudest rather than who could sing what.

Major Stone caught my eye and beckoned me to go with him. I grabbed my mug and moved off. The songs resounding louder as more people joined in with their respective preference. With the power of the songs building around me, I felt a sense of what pride these men and women held onto and fought for. It may not be their original country; It definitely wasn't their original life but instead, it was as part of something much bigger. Defense of Earth. Pre-emptive and surreal, these were the guys who had made it and lived to tell the tale.

Major Stone and I found a corner where it was relatively less noisy and private. Putting an arm around my shoulder, he huddled me close for a conspiratorial chat.

"Armpit, we need you brother, I put in a good word with my controller and he said we could have you in our team for the next mission. It also means we will join in your next few Sims to build a bit of momentum."

I stopped him and asked my own question, “What mission did you just get back from? Does it have anything to do with an Alfred Malabourne?”

Stone’s surprised eyes were answer enough. “You seem well informed for a trainee Colonel. How could you possibly know that?”

“Never mind that. I’m just curious if you recovered him?”

“Recovered him? No! no, our mission was to scout for him.”

“What? isn’t he a captive of the Reapers?”

“Yes, we were doing a reconnaissance of the facility. John Stiles was right. It was a near thing, but we got out without being detected. We had to dispose of a few sentries but Lt. Sánchez managed to make it look like local animals had done it. So we are pretty confident that they don’t know we were there.”

“I see, so you want me to be part of the rescue?”

“That's it exactly Colonel, our team doesn’t have a heavy duty magical user and since we have been there already, we are the ideal team to go back”

“Did you see him? or anyone else held prisoner at the facility?”

“Someone else? He was alone when he was captured. Who else could be there? The facility is far from the Reapers core power. It is quite remote. I doubt there are many prisoners although the place is plenty big enough. But with the way the Reapers are, he probably doesn’t have much time before they move him or kill him. The Reapers are not known for keeping prisoners longer than the time it takes to extract knowledge and then drain their life “

“Do you know he is a Prodigy?”

“Deary me, you really are well informed. Yes, he is the prodigy that Hugo mentioned before. A very experienced one at that”

“So how will we make a difference if, with all his power, he can’t make a difference and save himself?”

“Aah, well Colonel, I don’t like to blow my own whistle much but we are the most effective team the Absinthe have at the moment. We have more successes than failures, and we haven’t failed a mission for the last 121 outings. The next most successful team is that group of Russians. Ex-Spetnaz chaps. Their tally is only half of ours. Truth be told, Hugo is our ace in the hole. I’ve yet to see someone or something match his strength and resolve.”

“Okay, so what you saying is I should be honored to join your team?”  
My eyes twinkled mischievously

“Aye, ye be right in that, and similarly we are lucky to have the first pick of the new recruits.”

“Okay, now that we have finished stroking each other's egos, I have one more request. Can we include Sarah in the team? That woman has bigger balls than me. She literally carried me to the island on Nico Sim.”

Stone chuckled. “Aye, she does at that, okay Colonel, I will see if I can arrange it, but in the meantime, I have to help you get into shape. Your body has not had a proper exercise for at least a week, and we have to get the in-Sim stamina across to the real you. Follow me.”

Major Gladstone appeared to have sobered up quite a lot and he led me towards an alcove in the room that had a few pool and snooker tables, some table tennis tables and half a basketball court with hoop all set up. We moved past them and the few people using them and into an adjoining room. As I walked in, I heard the clank of metal on metal and the sour smell of sweat that every gym ever made reeks of. It was a familiar smell, like a homecoming. I beamed from ear-to-ear. Arrayed before me was one of the most unusual and advanced gyms I had ever seen. Several people were

going at it, some on treadmills, some doing reps with floating bars and several machines seemed to open like clamshells where you placed your arm or leg in. All those who were training had fierce and determined expressions. I had yet to see someone not in shape. This whole ship was a thriving community and I was beginning to feel a part of it.

“We need you to train in here for the next week, at least five hours a day.” At my raised questioning eyebrows, he continued “ Your body will be able to cope. The machines are programmed with your details and will guide your regime but if you have any problems, just ask Grant to fix it. The nanobot stims literally put steroids to shame. It also brings me to another point. You will be training with us every day in Simscape too. Grant says that you have mastered all the survival sims so far, and that putting you into more would be a waste of time.”

“Now hold on there Stone, I don’t want to be streamlined through. If there is training to be done, I should do it.” This time it was Major Stone who raised his eyebrows in surprise. Then he chuckled. “Aye, the leveling up system is quite addictive.”

Reverting to my first name he said “Petros, five hours of gym and an additional six hours in the sims training with us is not the easy road. Believe you me!” he stated in finality. “The real question is, can you handle it?”

When he put it like that I suddenly realized what I was getting myself into. Eleven solid hours a day of any type of intensive training for a week would be borderline insane. On the other hand, I had been doing training for the best part of my life, so essentially it would be more like refreshment training. Bringing muscle memory to the fore. Besides, what other choice did I have? I wanted in on this rescue mission. The worst that could happen is I would not be ready and they would go without me. I had learned long ago that the best way to do a thing was to Nike it, rather than ponder and reflect about it.

“Okay, so when can I start?”



# CHAPTER 19

## ENEMY REVEALED

“Before we begin, you should know your enemy.” With that cryptic Sun Tzu statement, Stone led me out of the gym and officers mess and out of the general quarters area. We walked along many corridors to a restricted elevator. He punched in a code, it did a retina scan and allowed us to proceed down several floors. I tried to ask where we were going but the Major kept his grim silence. At last we came to the brig. A large warehouse area with cells all along the walls. Several humans were mounted on translucent platforms within, similar to what I had been mounted on in my room. Major Stone ignored them and we walked to the cells at the furthest end of the large area. When I first saw it, my skin literally crawled in response. It was not on a Sim platform at all, and instead the cell looked like a more traditional jail cell. Metal bars separated it from us, in addition to a barrier force field.

The creature was not looking at us; instead, it was methodically hitting its head against the wall. Blood and tissue smeared along the area it was hitting. Its body appeared bipedal; perhaps it had been human at some stage, but that was not the case now. It stopped banging its head when it sensed us and turned its undead and horrendous gaze towards us. The mashed features of its forehead dripping gore into milky white eyes. The eyes themselves seemed blind and yet the creature was looking at us, there was absolutely no doubt. It opened its mouth in a hideous rictus and gave a full-throated roar, spittle flying in our direction. The jaws extending unnaturally wide. I could see its teeth were all sharp amidst the rufescent fetid flesh of its gums and immediately realized it had been an elf, although what it was now I could not rightly say.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed in horror.

“Meet Elfie, ” said Major Stone in a low and understated voice.

“What the F...” I couldn’t even finish my expletive as my hand reached for my mouth. I was shocked and horrified to my core.

“Yes Laddie, what we face is nothing short of a pure nightmare.” Stone’s face was stern, “Elfie was one of the first to ever be contained. He was here long before I joined up. They have had him down here for a very long time feeding him rodent type creatures. It’s quite a shock to see them for the first time. This then is the enemy, a Reaper Devourer. One of their millions of ground troops. This particular one comes from Elf stock. He was infected and then turned when he returned to his people. They kept him alive and contained and have given him to us for our training. What you will meet out in the field will have the same basic characteristics although the Reapers use any sapient body form. We have taken to calling them Zombies. They see, but they are not using the eyes of the body they are inhabiting, so blinding them physically doesn’t work. They are literally animated cadavers and like all ghouls of stories past, the only way to make one dead is to cut off its head.

“Is it a virus? How does one get infected?”

Stone shrugged “I don’t rightly know, but I do know if they bite you and consume your flesh, then you will turn into one of them over time after a short agonizing illness and then death. A simple glancing bite or scratch won’t do it, so their saliva is not the contaminant. Your flesh has to pass down their gullet. Hugo was bitten once, lost part of his calf but he chopped off the creatures’ head before it had a chance to swallow his meat. He’s still going strong.”

Inwardly I cringed. *I had trained with several K9 units in the past and those dogs were incredibly ferocious. When I saw them take bites and sometimes consumed what they had bitten off of human suspects had made my skin crawl. Those were just dogs, fair enough, they were large dogs, however, these were sapient, intelligent beings with no feeling at all and they wanted to eat you alive. I didn’t know quite how to feel about it.*

“You say ground troops, but what about their officers?” I enquired, still mesmerized by the huge gaping maw that seemed to be stuck in an open-mouthed silent scream. Elfie had moved to the bar, and was trying to ram his head between them. Major Stone pressed a control that caused the barrier separating us to change color preventing Elfie from seeing us, but we could still see him. The creature... the zombie continued to try squeeze itself through the bars in our direction.

“They have a sixth sense for life energy, a desire to eat any living flesh they can get their hands on. Without working eyes, they navigate fairly complex areas, understanding about doors, about going around or over things, and once aroused they have an uncontrollable urge to rend and kill. Their strength is inhuman, and as a group, they incite each other into a frenzy that increases their strength to even greater heights. When damaged, they can heal by eating living flesh. It has to be alive though when it passes their lips, and somehow they drain the life power from it and broken bones mend, stripped flesh grows and tendons and sinews even repair themselves. As I said, the only cure for this creature is to lop off its head. Their senses are not universal though. We have found they can see...” Stone made inverted commas in the air, “...in only one direction. Their hearing is pretty poor, but their sense of smell and sense of life is very capable. That cloak you are wearing would protect you from their scrutiny, but only beyond a ten-meter radius. Any closer and he will know you are there like he does now.” He then looked at me. “The Reaper officers are not seen often, they control these troops from behind the scenes. some kind of mind control. The officers seem to have a mind link that gives them full control of the zombie, which lessens the further the creatures are away from them. This zombie has never had a controller. The so-called officers control between 50-100 Zombies each. They, the officers I mean, are often encased in some form of armor and some of them even have magical body shields. In all our missions, we have never tangled with an officer directly, only their minions. You should well know that small teams tactics require we get in, achieve the objective and get out. We don’t mess around. Our orders are to stay out of these officers way and make as little contact as possible, preferably avoiding the Ghouls, which are smarter versions of Elfie as well as the Zombies. Our focus is on destroying their ability to find life rather than wiping them out.”

“So you are telling me that in all the years you have been fighting the Reapers, the 121 successful missions of your unit, that you have never fought an officer directly?” I asked incredulously.

Stone nodded resignedly. “Aye, our war on the Reapers is little more than an annoyance to them. Our main objective to date has been to disable their detection posts, hindering their ability to sense any emissions from Earth’s direction. The radio detection posts and similar type tech are used by them to detect sapient civilizations. The officers leave the ghouls and zombies to guard them once they have set up the posts. Sometimes an officer is present but even in that case, they stay concealed and protected, out of harm's way. Often the ghouls are remnants of the sapient life from that particular planet and the Reapers use the post to narrow in on those survivors left on those worlds. Eventually, the entire world gets wiped out. People of consequence are captured, tortured and whisked away to either be consumed or kept as a source of knowledge, but when the knowledge runs dry, they are consumed too. The planet we are going to has local sentients called Scalars. Large-scaled grey beings with four arms and two legs. They also have three eyes. Strange looking fellahs but with all that's going on, you should be used to strange beings by now. When they are turned into zombies or ghouls, they are formidable enemies.”

I shook my head. *We were getting nowhere with this war if we only took out the troops. The masterminds behind it should be our targets.* I kept my thoughts to myself as I asked

“Do we have a General or similar person in charge? Someone who controls our movements according to some overall master plan?”

“Well, no, not really in the way you mean it. The Absinthe has a command structure they answer to, but the Absinthe we work for are incognito. They are going against the wishes of their controlling bodies by enabling us and assisting us. The missions we go on are just missions of opportunity rather than any coordinated effort to undermine the enemy.”

I could see Stone was frustrated just by the way he answered me. “Colonel, you are the highest ranking officer that has ever joined us. We need someone stepping up and taking the fight to the enemy, but I think both you and I know that you are way under-cooked to be doing anything else except learning for the next while. My hope and I suspect the Absinthe’s hope is you will be our main man once you have gained enough experience.”

I took a last look at the terrifying creature and considered what I could do against a nation of undead creatures with only a few hundred trained men. Men who couldn’t even use modern weapons unless we acquired them in the field.

I would have laughed if not for the overwhelming sense of wanting to cry.

On the way back to my room, I questioned Stone about the Scalars. They were a medieval level technology sapient race that was losing their world piece by piece. We were just spectators trying to slow down the Reapers progress from the sidelines. The Scalars didn’t even know we existed. It made little sense.

Major Stone led me back to my room, and I plugged myself in, not quite literally, but close enough. It involved lying down on the translucent barrier and assuming a relaxed, restful pose. The robotic arms would extend out and clamp my head, then something would happen, and I was immobilized completely. Grant's voice would reverberate inside my head asking if I was ready and then the stomach tube would insert and several other tubes would attach making bodily functions automatic.

# CHAPTER 20

## PREPARATION

The next week followed in a blur. It was as bad as hell week if not worse because it required my constant commitment without supervision or structure. There was no drill instructor or PT sergeant; I was left completely to my own devices. My own schedule. With this newfound freedom I became intimately familiar with the Absinthe ship, meeting a good many more people in the rec room and gym, one of whom made a distinctive impression upon me.

Feldwebel Swart, a huge well-built man from Germany with African roots was a lively and energetic gym enthusiast. He would often rep for me and was a constant source of inspiration on all things to do with physical training.

Without his constant badgering and persistence, I doubted I would have progressed as smoothly. His German-accented English would resound in my ears as I strained on the bench and leg press machines.

“Vone more Armpit! Always vone more!”

The food and beverages were top-notch and very nourishing and supplied in copious quantities. Besides shipboard life though, the Sims I experienced with the team were all bleak landscapes filled with deadly four armed, three-eyed ghoulish zombie creatures that attacked without restraint and strained my unarmed combat abilities to the max. My swordsmanship, hand-to-hand and staff fighting skills, as well as teamwork, also increased markedly.

As a regular member of the team, I was under Major Gladstone’s purview despite retaining my rank as a title.

Stone mentioned that team leadership was a privilege I would have to earn should I ever wish to replace him. What he meant by that I wasn’t exactly sure but I felt it might involve some kind of prowess duel.

*Besides learning more about my own abilities and ranking up several levels, I learned about the other members in the team and how they all complimented each other. Stone was right in that my abilities brought a redundancy to the team that gave him as the commander backup options. Especially when the team was split up, or if one of the other members died in the Sims.*

*I died several times, especially in the first few Sims. mainly because I was unaware of just how powerful the enemy Reaper troopers were. They weren't pleasant deaths and I tried not to dwell on them. Whoever invented these Sims made sure that the death experience was something you wanted to avoid.*

Lieutenant Sarah Wilson joined us towards the end of the week, but we all quickly realized that her training had not been as specialized as ours, nor had she seen much beyond the basics in the forms of unarmed combat and handheld close-quarters weapons. While we all agreed that she was resilient, we decided she would not accompany us on this rescue mission.

It was on the last training mission that we won a side quest.

The team had just found a small farmstead in the rocky countryside on our way back from the target building towards the extraction point; We were running later than usual and we were looking for a place to hole up for the night.

The local version of farm animals were all dead, partly eaten and shredded. Stone thought the barn would be a good shelter for the night and sent Sánchez and Stills to sweep the immediate area for threats, while myself and Charlie were assigned to clear out the homestead. Stone and Hugo remained on overwatch.

During the missions, Stone used Charlie, Sánchez, Stills, and I the most. Probably to give us the benefit of more experience. Usually, when Hugo got involved, it was when things had gone tits up and we were about to be overrun.

Hugo had no affinity with the five elements of magic besides his life magic. Like a paladin berserker, he would cleave and decimate with pure

brute strength. His endurance and stamina were off the charts and his main three weapons he could summon were a hulking great axe, a great sword and a staff that could be mistaken for a great club. He certainly used it as such. He was the strength we fell back on when our own was about to fail.

Stone kept him in reserve to fill the gaps if one of us lessers failed. I was told that would be my role on the mission, but that I needed frontline experience and the team needed to learn if they could trust my abilities. They were solid tactics and I couldn't fault Stone one bit for his leadership. He was a great leader and knew how to get the best out of his men. I was enjoying working with professionals again.

As we approached the door, I heard movement inside and after peering through the window and identifying two Scalar adults inside I indicated to Charlie to go ahead with the breach. My hand on his shoulder, we moved forward, where he swung his size 14's against the flimsy door. Smashing it open. I braced him, then I stepped past and into the room where I identified and engaged the two Scalar zombies trying to break down a steel braced trapdoor in the floor of their home.

After decapitating them both, Charlie and I cleared the rest of the house, then using a crowbar type tool, Charlie broke the hinges to the trapdoor and I jumped down, coat flaring behind me into a dark and dusty cellar. The wooden furniture that had been down there was all piled up as a makeshift barrier along the steps leading down. I tripped and fell and indirectly barged my way through when I came upon two young Scalar, a young boy and his not much older sister clinging to each other in desperation. The boy had a sharp knife pointed in my direction, two of his four hands clasping it as if clinging to life itself. Arms trembling and eyes tearful, he shouted something at me. His sister had that blank, shocked look trauma victims wear. Her mind was far away, and she just held onto her younger brother, and probably saved me from a serious injury by preventing her brother from trying to slice me while I struggled with the broken bits of furniture that tangled my feet.

Charlie shouted down the hatch "Armpit! are you okay? what is down there?"



“Yeah, yeah, hold on a minute. We have some Civies down here. Uninfected it looks like. They’re kids.” My stilted reply was done in stages as I found my feet and presented my open hands to the boy, showing I was unarmed. I had dispelled the blade when I was falling.

“Kids?” was Charlie's reply as he clambered down the steps to join me. Charlie’s imposing size made the girl faint, and the boy cowered over her, still pointing the knife at us. He was saying something to his sister, but she was out cold.

“Some magnetism you have there, Charlie.” I mocked lightheartedly “She swooned at the sight of you.”

“Well, I’ll be darned!” was Charlie's snappy retort “What are kids doing here?”

“It ’s a war zone. There are bound to be kids.” I said. Looking around the room to see if there was anyone else down here. It was clear what had happened. The parents had hidden the kids away when the Reaper troops had come through this area and while they both had been infected. The kids, safe in the cellar, had not come out, and with supplies had survived down here until our arrival.

“Don’t worry, we are here to help” I crooned, not sure what else to say. I didn’t know the Scalar language and hoped by my tone the boy would get the idea and put the weapon down before he hurt himself.

His attention on me, he turned to follow me as I circled around and was surprised when Charlie moved suddenly and quickly to disarm him. The boy put up quite a fight, but Charlie held on, pinning both pairs of arms while carrying the boy upstairs. I picked up the unconscious girl and carried her gently. I placed her on the floor in the main living room. The young boy had stopped struggling, but his eyes held serious malice. I chuckled at the irony. Here I was the alien. These medieval people had never seen humans before and were just coming to terms with their predicament against the Reapers.

Stone moved into the house with Sánchez and Stills, and I showed the dead parents with a flick of my head, then using hand signals asked them to remove the corpses, while I blocked the view from the little lad.

Fortunately, he had been too busy wrestling with Charlie and now only had eyes for me.

When his attention shifted to see what Stone, and the others were up to, I stepped closer to block his view, conjuring my staff to distract him. If I had to guess, he was probably about the equivalent of an eight-year-old human child. His size and demeanor were about the only similarities. The rest of him was very different and left my thoughts reeling when I thought about how my life had changed. His Scalar features of almost reptile type skin, cool to the touch, with a grey tone were strange to my sight. I had until now only seen the zombie versions of Scalars and it was amazing to see this species without it trying to bite my head off.

His three eyes were tearful as he himself tried to come to terms with what was happening. It was a lot for a little boy to take in and comprehend. I reached out my hand to touch both his arm and his sister's foot and let the magic flow. She came to abruptly, sitting up with a gasp. The healing and cleansing spell dissipating any dehydration and dementia she was suffering from, similarly, the boy appeared to fill with vitality where before there had only been despair. It was then that the two Scalar kids dissolved into the ether as if they never existed and a red glowing orb replaced the girl. I checked my battle log and saw a new prompt.

Bonus Quest: Rescue the Scalar Children and restore them to full health
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Bonus quest complete!
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You have received a reward.
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I looked at the others in the room. Hugo had just moved back in to see what was going on and Stone indicated we should all touch the glowing orb.

“We’ll be seeing ye on the other side,” he said cryptically as everyone including myself stepped forward, grasped the orb and together we faded from view.

The next thing I knew was that all too familiar vertigo feeling, and without fail I stumbled.

Next to me was Sánchez; the others were not with us. Both he and I were standing on a rocky ledge with a view out towards a luscious valley, which extended into a plain out below us. Far in the distance, I could make out several forests and two very large and tall trees in one of the forests. I immediately realized I was back in the land of Illuminous.

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# CHAPTER 21

## REAL LIVE ORCS

A gruff voice spoke from behind us and both Raúl and I turned like startled cats on a hot plate.

“Welcome humans, you are just in time for learning. When there is time for learning, it is a good day.”

The creature speaking to us was tall, covered in animal furs and hides. His face and head were large like a squashed pumpkin, his mouth, nose and eyes like a frog or reptile; bulbous and large. He had two thick tusks extending from his lower jaw protruding up along his cheeks and then curling away. Next to him was Journeyman Robert. His stern expression seemed like it hadn't changed since the day I met him.

“J.B.!” I exclaimed as he winced, then with his head indicated I should greet the creature next to him.

“I am Petros, whom do I have the honor of meeting?” I enquired diplomatically. Hand extended in greeting.

The frog face hippo dude frowned then looked at Journeyman Robert. He clearly was at a loss at what to do next.

Before things could get more out of control, Raúl stepped forward, put in a polite bow and said, “Lord Groggar, you honor us with your presence. Please forgive my comrade here. He is new to the Illuminous land and knows nothing of your ways.”

Then turning to me he said, “Petros, this is Lord Groggar, the leader of the Orcs, Champion in the Dark. Fiercest of the Fire, Fury of the Five.”

Quickly catching on, I took back my proffered hand and bowed, “I am Petros, A retired Colonel. I left all my other titles behind but the list is long, perhaps not as cool as yours, but impressive to me none-the-less.”

“hmmmm, you make a jape?” was the deep baritone croaky reply.

“Forgive me your honor, Sir. It has been my experience that titles are tedious once the pleasantries are done. I recognize that you are a fearsome leader with many titles. Until I know and understand more, I make light of my own titles, as I am unsure which ones would impress you.”

This seemed to mollify him and I tried not to smile. It was hard to take a tall frog-faced hippo dude seriously like I was in some kind of storybook. He was like a Shrek character combined with a Phumba warthog face. I caught Raúl’s eye and could see he was holding back amusement at my antics. When the mystified Lord turned to one side and unsuccessfully whispered, “What is J.B.?” to Journeyman Robert in what could only be described as a puzzled expression, it was too much.

At first, the mirth built up, and I caught it, compressing it, forcing it back down. I knew this wasn’t funny; it wasn’t funny; no, it wasn’t funny. Then a squeak erupted. Barely contained. At my own squeak, Raúl squeezed out a kind of snort and then the laughter burst forth from me like a howling deluge. I made it worse by the way I tried desperately to hold it back. But to no avail, and I laughed so hard that tears ran from my eyes. Raúl was little better. His hand resting on my shoulder and squeezing his eyes shut as he lost the battle and erupted in laughter too. It took us a while, but eventually, we calmed down.

The Lord and J.B. both standing there and watching us. Both of them were very much not amused. At last I put my hands up and said how sorry I was. It didn’t help that I burst out laughing again.

In the end, J.B. came forward and with an incantation silenced both Raúl and myself. It was done so suddenly and completely that I lost all sense of mirth. Instead, I was quite surprised that he could do that. The effect showed up on my HUD.

You have been silenced. The silence effect will last for 19 minutes: 54 seconds, 19 minutes: 53 seconds, 19 minutes: 52 seconds...

The next twenty minutes were spent walking along a dusty track listening to J.B. explaining in no uncertain terms that it was a great honor for us to be tutored by Lord Groggar and that making japes and laughing in his face were not considered polite. I nodded solemnly and like two chastened schoolboys we bowed and nodded respectfully at the Orc again.

When the twenty minutes of silence were up I was deeply embarrassed, not sure what had come over me. It was very unusual for me to be so condescending to another. Especially considering our situation. It was another example of my youthful hormones running amok and my mind having to remember how to deal with it. I again apologized profusely and tried to explain the situation to Lord Groggar.

He was gracious in his way, and as we had been walking came upon an area that looked a lot like an arena. The natural curve of the mountain side we had been upon flattened out to form a clearing, devoid of scrub and grass. The rocks had been moved to accommodate a central oval and filled up the surrounding area to provide seating. Upon those seats were at least another fifty Orcs. They sat in stoic silence and appeared to be awaiting our arrival.

Raúl seemed hesitant, and I asked him if he knew what was going on here.

“Sorry for earlier, I didn’t mean to make our situation worse. It’s just that everything caught up with me. The laughing was just a release, unfortunately at the very worst time.”

“No worries, Colonel.” Raúl replied with a grin “I was just as guilty. But when you said those things, and I saw the expressions on their faces, man, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Sssh! Stop it. You going to make me laugh again.” I muttered but couldn’t hide my smile. The mirth still bubbling around inside me. “Just tell me about these guys and why you know them?”

With an effort, Raúl replied, “Lord Groggar was my trainer when I chose the Dark Assassin Class. His people taught me the magic of the dark. He is the leader of the Orcs and rules them with an iron fist. These Orcs you see here will probably be our training partners.”

“Sparing partners more likely” I intoned ominously, noticing they were all armed with an assortment of bows, staffs, and swords. Some had vicious daggers in their belts, curvy sharp blades, jagged serrated edges, and those were just the ones I could see.

“Yeah, you are right Colonel. It is often his way to push ability to focus beyond limits. It is good training for us and for them.”

“But what about the magical aspect of the dark? Like that stunt you pulled on Nico Sim. How will he teach me?”

“They taught me while staying in their village. It’s just over the crest of the rise, a few clicks to the North.” Raúl showed with his head. “I had books to read, and the shaman spent time with me helping me focus my will. I wasn’t brought to the Arena until I had mastered the magic first. Probably you will be introduced to the clan and then do something similar. We have to pay attention, Colonel. They are calling us to the center.”

I turned and saw J.B. and Lord Groggar had moved into the center of the Arena and were waiting for us. J.B.’s worried eyes seemed poised to silence us again. I hurried to them and Groggar opened his arms wide to encompass the surrounding audience.

Magnanimously he introduced me as ‘Colonel Petros of many, perhaps unimportant titles’ and I felt the warm glow of embarrassment as the audience chuckled and snickered.

Inwardly I thought strike two goes to Groggar. He turned his beady-eyed gaze to me and with those open arms embraced me. Then stepping back while his large hands squeezed each of my shoulders he looked me in the eye.

“Your human body has become a fiery glow, almost amber. It is one of my favorite colors. I did not know your species to have chromatophores?”

By now I was purple in mortification and suddenly regretting my youthful body. Strike three to Groggar and I was out. Gritting my teeth, I put up a brave face, even if a hot one. Raúl and J.B., traitorous wretches that they were, were both smiling jubilantly at my discomfort.

Sighing inwardly I turned and faced the crowd and bowed deeply. Giving myself time to recover.

The Orcs applauded politely, some still snickering, and I surprised them all when I addressed them in a loud and clear voice.

“It is a great honor for our people to be trained by such renowned warriors as the Orc nation. From the bottom of my heart I thank you and look forward to progressing in my abilities to cause more pain to the Reapers.”

This seemed to cheer them up, and they began to applaud. Raúl gave a mighty whoop and suddenly everyone was whooping and applauding. These were bawdy folk, who didn't sit on ceremony for long.

Lord Groggar was smiling now and silenced the crowd with a wave of his hands.

“These humans need to train and we need to train them. Let it be done!”

He then clapped his hands twice and the group of Orcs moved from their seating to encircle the center area completely. Two stepped out and bowed in front of Raúl, which he returned, then he summoned his saber and began to defend himself from their attacks rigorously. Swirls of dark magic pulsed from them from time to time towards him, and each time he deflected, pivoted or evaded. While I was standing watching, J.B. sidled up to me and passed me two books.

“These are for you Colonel, read them when you are able, you will need them.” With that, he made to leave, but I called out to him “Wait I want to thank Horatio for his gifts, where is he?”



“Prince Horatio is a busy man and was unable to meet with you this time, but don’t worry Lord Groggar is a most capable instructor and one of the fiercest warriors on Illuminous. He stands by the Covenant and will honor his duties. Respect them, Petros, they are fearsome warriors. I will meet with you again to discuss some pertinent matters before you leave.”

“Wait...” I replied, but he was gone into the swirling mass of orcs surrounding us. They stamped their feet rhythmically as the battle between Raúl and the two Orcs build to a crescendo. Raúl was being handed his arse, but occasionally he would get in one or two good blows. Unfortunately for him, for every one or two he landed, they landed four or five vital strikes. It was a very unfair battle. I pressed forward, dispelled the books into my ring and summoned my staff.

I could see it was a non-lethal battle so I would have to curb my killer instincts, but that only added to the challenge. I swung my staff low and swept the one orcs feet out from under him. Okay, it was a blindside strike, but they were two on one. I wanted to even the odds.

“I was wondering when you would join.” panted Raúl as I moved in next to him.

“I didn’t know it was a group effort,” I shouted back.

“From now on Armpit, everything is a group effort.” Raúl gasped in pain then as one of the dark shadows seemed to grab his shoulder and wrench him down to the ground. I swept my staff out again to keep the two orc fighters at bay while Raúl recovered.

“What are the rules?” I asked as Raúl gained his feet and unsteadily stood back to back with me.

“No rules besides no killing strokes, also you can’t dismember anyone.”

“Great to know, but how do you prevent that using a sword?”

“Skill!” was Raúl’s grunted reply as he parried a blow aimed at his knee, “You can break their bones, slice them to incapacity, but you forfeit

the match if you chop off even one finger or magically burn anyone to cinders.”

“Alrighty then!” I replied in my best Jim Carey voice and proceeded to block, parry and repostè as best I could with the staff. It was definitely a superior weapon under the circumstances, allowing me to block and repostè in almost the same instant. With two of us going at it, it was a lot easier for Raúl and we soon began to wear down our opponents, who then swapped out for another two. This carried on for some time, and my stamina was flagging. One-to-one the orcs were civilized compared to the Reapers we had faced in training and clearly we were the superior sparing pair, so by swapping back and forth, with a new pair moving in when the current pair started flagging, it kept up the intensity and pushed us beyond our limits.

We were SEALS, it didn’t matter how many they sent at us, we would fight until we couldn’t fight anymore.

At some stage the orc who I had floored with my entrance to the fight did a flying leap to return to the fight, I guess he was holding a grudge and his overhand strike coming down towards my head at an alarming rate caught me by surprise. I didn’t think I could get out the way without endangering Raúl behind me so I rammed the staff point directly into his midsection as if I was using a spear. The Orcs already bulging eyes seemed to pop from their sockets, his tongue protruded and his body sagged around the end of the staff as he came to an abrupt and resounding stop with an “Ooooph!”, my staff hit him cleanly and solidly in the midsection. I extended my will through the staff and pushed, opening my ways to enable the inner spell to direct him back the way he had come. The throaty oomph sound that wheezed out his mouth almost made his tongue do a raspberry. It was then that I saw the protruding tongue get snapped clean off when his teeth crashed together from the impact and it danced in the air like a pink salmon jumping out of a lake onto the ground beside me.

A scarlet dash of blood the last thing I saw of his mouth as the tongues owner disappeared over the crowd into the distance to the jubilant cheers and cries of alarm of his brothers-in-arms.

A sudden throaty roar shouted “STOP!” and everyone froze in their tracks. I was really grateful for the breather.

“Oh shit, what did you do?” was Raúl’s anguished panting question as he stared down at the still spasming tongue on the ground.

“Nothing, he bit his own tongue off. I did nothing!” I replied innocently.” A very large and fit looking Orc stood looking down at the dying pink tongue, then looked at me with what can only be described as pure malice. I willed away my staff and presented my hands placatingly.

“I didn’t do it, I have no blade, he bit his own tongue off,” I said, hoping he was a reasonable sort. Unfortunately, that kind of hoping in these circumstances was like winning the lottery. It never happens. A group of Orcs moved in suddenly and grabbed Raúl and manhandled him out of the ring, leaving me and the nasty and very competent looking Orc alone.

The big fellow drew two blades and charged and I got the feeling that all bets were off. I summoned my Katana this time and against his two blades was sorely pressed. He kept nicking me with one of his blades, a small cut here, a little slice there and each one was beginning to add up to a plethora of pain, not to mention the little tributaries of blood that began to flow freely from all the cuts. It wasn’t that he could get through my defenses completely, and I had many chances to dismember him. I held back however, and tried to apply the same tactic as he was using. Death by a thousand cuts. He was way ahead before I had the presence of mind to apply the same tactic.

I had lost and was losing a lot of blood. My stamina was low, and I was only holding on barely. The latest cut above my brow was causing blood to flow into my left eye and the wily Orc was attacking me from that side, knowing my vision was obscured. Raúl had been manhandled away from the start of this confrontation and could not join in. I could feel the inner fire building and I had to struggle to keep it contained. If I unleashed it, this Orc would become my next victim, and I was already being punished for a rule that I did not technically break. It was unfair, and I wanted, no, I desperately needed a rest.

Utter madness was what this was. How could these Orc's expect me to prevent what happened? I hadn't meant for the guy to bite off his tongue. Hell, I didn't even want to be fighting them. I was here for training my mind, not using brute force to win. It was then that I realized that that is exactly what I needed to do. Use my mind. I hadn't used a magical barrier yet, but it was difficult to do with the distraction of having to concentrate on the fight.

Over the previous Sims I had learned that as a mage, it was important to be attuned and focused before fighting in order to summon magical abilities, and with this sudden escalation, I had not even considered using those skills yet. Add to that, if I conjured a barrier or similar process, it was akin to a very large drain on my system. The mana would deplete like a fuel gauge in a 1967 Chevrolet Camaro.

Once the tank was empty, my magical abilities would be next to worthless. I had also discovered that conjuring something finite and concrete like a shirt, pants etc was a lot less draining than making a force barrier with no clearly defined construction principles. Finite articles that were conjured into existence were much easier and would not deplete my mana further, whereas a barrier was ever changing and had to conform to my moving body, while remaining impervious to foreign bodies trying to penetrate it, and thus remained linked to my mana pool, siphoning off as needed.

Hoping it wasn't too late, I began to block only, allowing him to press the attack. My movements were still smooth, but not nearly as aggressive as I had been earlier. With his two blades free to swing at me without concern of retaliation, the large Orc began to get bolder and bolder, making his swings and stabs more frequent and thus forcing me to stay in this defensive mode. Blocking and parrying for all that I was worth. How long this went on for I could not tell you, only that I was so ingrained in the flow of the movements that time seemed to stand still. He was wearing me down, my stamina was depleting. His sword skills ability matched my own, if not surpassed it and with two swords he had the advantage.

I had seen his pattern though and knew that he would strike once, then twice on my right before a jab and sweep of his blade on my left where my vision was obscured. It was the third time he would do it. The last two times I had barely kept his blade away on the sweep and I could see his grim determination as he envisioned slicing into my chest to teach me a well-deserved lesson. He was fixated on it, hurrying his left strikes to make me commit even more fully to my right side so that when I corrected to defend on my left, I might overbalance or overextend. He did not expect what happened next.

A few years ago, I had designed my own practice dummy that could take the abuse of sword swipes and strikes. I trained diligently with my Katana in an effort to keep fit and to further my own abilities in Kenjutsu, the Japanese term which means the art of the sword. Because my Katana was a master-crafted sword, wrought of immense skill, the blade was exceptionally sharp and strong from the many hundreds of folds and welds it had undergone in the forging process. The subsequent polishing taking over three weeks was something I had immersed myself in under the tutelage of the Master who had made the blade for me. It had cost a trip to Japan, hence a lot of money, time and care but in the end, it had been worth it.

Knowing of the blade's sharpness, I was curious to learn its limitations, but at the same time wanted to limit the damage to the sword as it was irreplaceable. So I had fashioned a man-sized dummy to practice on and had explored with different materials to see which could best hold up to the sword strikes while still keeping the sword edge from dulling or chipping. What I had found was a product called Sorbothane. It was more elastic than rubber and absorbed around 95% of all mechanical shock impacts but still had good memory of its original form. I had made the dummy with a thick Sorbothane outer layer and three years later; The dummy was still going strong, albeit somewhat sliced up. That had been before my abduction.

Now as I concentrated, having taken the time during my defending to focus my mind, I conjured a thick cast of Sorbothane and rubber compound to surround my left arm as if I had a Plaster of Paris cast for a broken wrist. The drain of mana was intense but manageable.

Then I used my now buffed and padded left hand and wrist to intercept his attack at the very point where he was too committed to withdraw. The blade he carried also had a keen edge, and it sunk into the cast with a dull thunk. The full force of his swing being absorbed left only the sharpness of his blade to separate the material, and I hoped I had conjured enough material to capture his blade completely. The best part of the two-inch thick material is its ability to cling onto whatever had pierced or sliced into it, so when the Orc realized what I had done, he immediately tried to retract his blade pulling me towards him.

As a good duel-wielding swordsman should do, he placed his second blade in a position to impale me as I came forward. Expecting this and now only having to worry about one active sword, I deflected his point, stepped inside his guard and then using the pommel of my Katana struck him on the temple as hard as I could.

The impact contained a lot of my pent up fury and probably a lot of the inner energy I had been building up.

The surprised look and then the rolling back of his eyes as he collapsed at my feet left a feeling of satisfaction that I probably should not have felt so keenly.

Coming out of the trance of the fight, I heard not a whisper. It was totally silent around me. Everyone just stared at me. Some with grudging respect reflected in their eyes, others with disdain and incredulity. I stood there panting, blood pitter pattering onto the naked earth from my many cuts and the unconscious Orc warrior at my feet, his sword still embedded in the Sorbothane cast I had conjured. Then someone started to stamp his feet rhythmically. It started slowly at first then built in tempo and volume as more and more of the Orcs joined in. The wave of applause crashed over me, leaving me both exultant and euphoric. I just smiled in triumph and looked around for Raúl.

Instead of finding Raúl, I saw Lord Groggar making his way through the crowd. He appeared to be smiling, but it was hard to be sure.

“Congratulations Colonel, I name you Tongue Taker!” He bellowed, grabbing my free hand and holding it aloft like a boxer who had won a title fight. “You now have a title worthy to be amongst us!”

The Orcs began to chant “Tongue Taker! Tongue Taker!” and I received many pats on the back and jovial bows of appreciation.

“Come, we have trained, and we have learned, now let us eat, but beware of Tongue Taker or you shall go hungry tonight.”

Lord Groggar’s words were met with hearty laughter and I felt Raúl come up next to me smiling broadly, as everyone seemed to walk towards the village. The unconscious orc was only now coming around and several of his buddies were helping him to his feet. I later learned that the Orc who had lost his tongue had been taken back to the village where the Shaman would tend to him.

The Orc who had faced me in the solo fight was one of their Champions from the Elite Guard and that I had bested him was no mean feat.

We then made our way to the village as a long strung out group and several times I had to stop to rest. Most of my cuts had stopped bleeding, with only a few still oozing blood. I had dispelled the wrist-caste and Katana, leaving me free to attempt staving the blood flow from several of the deeper cuts. The movements of my body unfortunately prevented them from clotting. I definitely felt weaker at the loss of blood and wished that Raúl had an affinity for healing. It was one thing knowing how to heal others with magic but without the requisite spell, healing oneself was just not possible.

My last stop as we crested a rise gave me a complete view of the village where it nestled below. Huddled in the curve of this high valley up on the escarpment. It was typical of a village, maybe about fifty huts, with the larger and more stylish ones being on higher ground with pathways interspersed to all the huts spread out below along the expanse of the hillside.

A stream ran directly through the village, entering through the wall and meandering through with various canals tapping off towards the various homesteads. There was a small waterfall alongside what appeared to be the largest building. It was most likely a community hall or similar structure by its appearance. The entire village area was walled in with a mound of rocks

loosely packed atop one another except for a more solid structure at the entrance and exit of the stream. The wall had guard posts every hundred meters or so as it meandered around the village. At the lowest part of the village was an enclosure that seemed to contain some herds of different beasts. Maybe goats or pigs? I wasn't sure from this distance.

It was getting towards late evening and the setting sun was casting its last rays of light onto the tops of the escarpment where we were standing. The gloomy surge of night mere moments away. One of Lord Groggar's lieutenants encouraged me to hurry up and keep walking with the main party. He said it was unwise to be out alone after dark reeking of blood.

*I wondered to myself once again what the races of Illuminous had to fear. They seemed to all be martial races, with strong military inclinations. According to Prince Horatio, they all abided by some kind of collective covenant that bound them to protecting gems of immense power. The power that was used to forge them to this place, this plane, this world. Why were we as humans the go-between them and their enemy? Why would we be better suited to face the threat on their behalf and yet they still maintained military units and forces? It was something I would have to find out. Before I did, I would have to get healed and learn as much as I could from these people.*



# CHAPTER 22

## SHAMAN BAB

The Orcs guided us to a hut near the outskirts of the village, close to the wall, but within its protective embrace. It appeared to be an unused resting house for the guards. Raúl told me this was where he had stayed the last time he trained here and that they would require us to attend a banquet of welcome before training would continue the following morning. Regarding my healing, he said a Shaman would come around sometime soon to attend to me. In the meantime, I should clean up and refresh myself with a bucket using the aqueduct channel out in the yard behind the hut.

I did as he suggested and bathed my wounds as best I could. There were over thirty cuts extending all across my body. One of the worse ones was a stab into my thigh. I suspected it had nicked my femoral artery, but lucky for me it had not torn nor ruptured further. It was still seeping blood though, and hurt like the dickens. It was while I was standing naked in the gloom of late evening, rinsing off the dirt and grime with the small bucket filling with bloody water as I rinsed using the small aqueduct tapping off the main stream.

Dried blood and sweat from my battle combined with the flickering firelight from a torch on the patio were casting ghostly shadows around me. I was lost in a moment of nothingness. What I mean by nothingness is the kind of trance that men go into when in a shower or doing something methodical that doesn't require active engagement of the mind. It's the kind of trance that women seldom understand. They always believe we should be thinking something or planning, scheming, but never ever could we be doing anything that could be called "nothing". I was an expert in this form of trance. It often accompanied a day of fishing or came about while staring out over a beautiful landscape. Lost in this nothingness and soaking in the quiet noises around the village, I didn't notice the additional shadow that appeared next to me until it was almost upon me. When I did notice it, I

whirled around startled and before me stood a tall and sleek silhouette. The torchlight behind obscuring what could only be the Shaman. The figure was slimmer than I expected and seemed to have somewhat pronounced hips, a strange sort of curvaceousness in the typical pear shape. Come to think of it were those breasts?

I squeaked indignantly as I covered up my nether region realizing too late that this was a woman and an exquisite full-bodied one at that, standing not a few paces from me and she was half naked too, with only a platted skirt and bedecked in a plethora of beads, tattoos and piercings. Some piercings looked painful to say the least, but immediately struck a chord of possibility deep in my adolescent psyche, especially glinting and dangling as they did.

“Umm, ...Hi.” I said awkwardly, my posture one of mixed consternation. The phase where you have too many conflicting ideas and just melt down when none of them spring to the fore. She was still a rough silhouette, but the few glimpses I got of her were decidedly lovely. It appeared as if she was certainly topless with a chest as proud and packed as a peacock. Ok, probably not the best choice of words, but her long raven hair fanned out around her face, making it hard for me to see in the shadow she cast.

Her arms suddenly folded protectively across her chest and I realized I had been staring.

“Pardon me.” I mumbled as I focused and conjured my robe to cover myself to hide my flush of embarrassment and give myself some semblance of dignity.

“When they told me a human needed mending, they did not tell me I would find him prancing around naked and fouling our drinking water!” came her dry sultry voice that almost seemed to whisper in intensity.

I turned around seeing that the bucket I had been using had spilled over back into the aqueduct’s main channel. Catching it up, I tried to make amends, but the damage had been done and the dirty water was already in

the system. I could hear snickering coming from Raúl, who had disappeared back into the hut.

“It’s not that funny!” I snarled at him, only to hear his snickering increase to laughter.

The Shaman tisket at me and then spat a glob of phlegm onto the ground beside her in disgust at my antics. It must have been a cultural thing, but for me, that shattered the dreamy sexy appearance immediately.

“Thank you for coming to my aid so quickly, my name is Petros” This time I bowed slightly trying to follow the Orcs traditional form of meeting. She harrumphed and beckoned for me to come towards the patio in front of the wooden hut. In the light I saw her clearly for the first time, and the web of tattoos upon her body made her look fully clothed. The additional studs, piercings and beads dangling around her neck and from other places, left one realizing why she didn’t wear a top. That must chafe something awful. I again realized I was staring and tried to make direct eye contact instead. Her face was fair, not as dark as her fellow Orcs and she had pretty, almost delicate features. It made me reflect on what Prince Horatio had told me in that all five races were related by a common ancestor. The Orc men I had seen were not nearly this pretty however and their hippo frog faces didn’t seem to afflict their finer sex. Unless she was an anomaly. (Try saying that fast five times in a row).

“What should I do?” I enquired politely, wanting the healing to be done quickly. It was annoying having a flashing icon in my vision showing my depleting health and stamina, and the sting of the cuts had not yet abated, sometimes intensifying when I moved.

“Just stand still” she said and then with a frown and a guttural utterance she suddenly started to emanate a dark red fire which seemed to glow and distribute across her many tattoos, the dark lines became brighter and brighter outlining each picture on her torso, the patterns seeming to swirl with the contours of her body, then along down her arms and up her neck to engulf her face. The piercings which were everywhere seemed to glow brighter too, and I noticed a bright white gem shine as the stream of red

light seemed to flow towards it and then within it and then as it reached an almost unbearable intensity, the light reversed out along those same lines except this time the white gem seemed to bleed off the white light into the tattoo patterns, having absorbed the red light entirely.

The white gem was in her earlobe and as the stream contoured out, she grabbed my hand and I felt the stab of magical influence upon my body. The white light streamed from her along her tattoos and then into me. It seeped into my core and suffused my being. Streaming into me. It was warm and cool, dry and wet and all together intoxicating. It filled my being with an energy and sense of fulfillment that I had seldom felt before. It reverberated through my soul and I reveled in it. I felt like I had had my Christmas dinner, and Thanksgiving turkey all in one meal. I was satiated and intoxicated. I was... ALIVE!

As suddenly as it had started, the complete absence of it left me reeling. In its aftermath, I noticed my health bar had hit 100% and my stamina bar was replenished too. It wasn't the same kind of healing spell that I could do but wow, it had some kick to it.

"That there is some awesome Juju," I said, and the Shaman smiled weakly and then sat upon the patio edge. It had been an effort and not easily done.

"Thank you kindly," I stated. "May I know your name?"

"You may know what I tell you youngling, do not try to flatter me with kind words. I do my duty, no more, no less."

"Very well, ..um Shaman...ess?" I replied with an enquiring lilt.

"You may call me Bab. Shaman Bab. Now if you are all healed, I have other duties to attend. A word of warning, however, if you choose to drink tonight at the banquet, do not expect sympathy or healing. You will have to endure THAT on your own. On the morrow you will meet with one of my acolytes to begin your training in the Dark elements of magic and it would be wise to have a clear head."

With that she accessed another glob of offending phlegm from somewhere deep in her sinuous neck and cast it into the dark shadows where it hit something solidly, and I swear I could feel the shudder of its impact reverberate through my feet. I wisely kept silent, wondering how such a young, fair looking vixen could be both the Shaman of this village as well as the world's best spitting champion. Deciding at last that the jobs probably came hand-in-hand or is that tongue-in-cheek and that it would be best to get on with things, I excused myself from her presence, although she barely deigned to nod in dismissal as I went into the hut to grill Raúl on what else I didn't know about this place and these Orcs.

# CHAPTER 23

## SCALAR SURPRISE

“You have to realize, Petros, we are really in this world. It’s not like in the Sims. We used a red orb to travel here. That means our real physical bodies are here. Teleported from the Absinthe ship to this plane. So you can really die here. Be more careful than usual and don’t piss off the locals. They tolerate us and will help us, and all we have to do is conform to their customs and ways and follow their training. It is also the reason for your outburst of giggles after arriving. The red orb is known to build up emotions and make us somewhat unstable for the first few hours after porting.” explained Raúl.

We had been discussing the differences I had felt since coming to Illuminous and how it was more difficult getting and using magic than I had experienced before. It all made sense now. When I had first come to Illuminous with Horatio, I had been able to instinctively make shields almost without effort. This time I actively had to seek out my inner abilities and trigger them actively. Raúl had explained that it would be even more difficult when we were deployed because the Reaper officers had a dampening effect on magical abilities in their area of control. I was beginning to see again just how undercooked I was and began having second thoughts about joining the team. Despite my growing power, was I really ready for this new form of real combat?

With these thoughts roiling through my mind, we were summoned to the banquet and as guests of honor were given much attention. The whole event took place next to the town hall in a large open area. With the stars glinting above and fire torches around the periphery casting jovial shadows. Everyone was buzzing with excitement and I got the idea that banquets were not held very often. This was a very different sort of lifestyle to what the Elder Elves had, and reminded me somewhat of an Asterix comic book and one of the Gauls famous banquets, where tables and benches were

arrayed in a horseshoe-like arrangement while servers hustled from the cooking fires to the tables bringing freshly roasted meat, and various potato like vegetables. A fruit-flavored punch was served too that had a real kick to it and I soon forgot my worries and joined in wholeheartedly with the festivities. As it turned out, the Orc women were very much the fairer sex, and I caught many of them eyeing me speculatively. I was equally enamoured, being of young mind and body and certainly the alcoholic beverage was adding to my libidinous thoughts.

Before those could take root, however, Lord Groggar captured us, one under each protective arm as he led us to meet everyone else, one-by-one.

Both Raúl and I were toasted and greeted by almost everyone present, including the Orc Champion and the chap I had de-tongued. He couldn't speak very well as a result, and instead to make his point he put his arm around me and opening his mouth wide, showed me the new growth on his stunted appendage. It wiggled wetly in the back of his throat between the sparkling ivory of his tusks and teeth and that's about the time I lost track of proceedings, everything blending into dark but not unpleasant memories.

The unpleasantness only started about the time I woke up. Which was about the time I landed in the icy stream. Spluttering and swearing I came out of my drunken haze knee-deep in the middle of the very fresh mountain stream. A group of Orcs cheering as I realized they had been the ones to throw me in. I was naked again and had no idea how I had arrived in my current predicament. The jeering shouts from the townsfolk made me crouch down protectively as I saw Raúl completely passed out being carried along by another group of Orcs, also towards the river. His fate was sealed as I watched him arc through the air only to bluster and fumble up in much the same way I had, both of us shivering and naked in the middle of the stream. The Orcs quieted and Shaman Bab stepped forward.

"I warned you not to drink too much Tongue Taker" she intoned in the "I told you so" voice that mothers and sisters everywhere have access to.

I just groaned as the herd of elephants tried to break out from inside my skull. It was a rude awakening but was probably one of the most effective hangover cures I had ever had.

“Good, you are just in time!” echoed Lord Groggar’s voice from the opposite bank as a wave of warriors stepped to the bank and began disrobing. Raúl this time groaned loudly.

“Better summon your staff or sword Petros, we are going to spar. Just be warned that running water inhibits magic so you will have to concentrate really hard to just do the summoning. Madre de Dios! I forgot how badly that party drink of theirs affects me.”

He wasn’t wrong. I tried and failed several times before I got the staff in hand and by that time I had four burly Orcs with only their loincloths, moving ominously towards me, two with swords and two with pairs of short sticks, one in each hand. This was going to hurt.

“The same rules apply Petros, you can’t kill anyone and you can’t dismember anyone, but other than that, make them sorry.” said Raúl who was facing off to another four Orcs with the same weapon configuration and another two slightly further behind starting to wade into the river.

My head was throbbing, and I had the taste of bile in the back of my throat. Despite that, I pushed it out of my mind as I tried to get into battle mode. With almost the entire village along the banks of the stream, I realized we were supposed to stay in the water to complete this training. I had to look at it as training because if I didn’t I would accidentally hurt someone. I saw Raúl had managed to summon a similar loincloth to the warriors, so I tried the same. Instead of a loincloth, I got boxers, but those would do. What followed wasn’t pretty.

To sum it up it was a beat down, with Raúl and I getting the worst end of it. Okay, they outnumbered us and we gave as good as we got, but in the end, we got clubbed down and cut to ribbons. It doesn’t matter who you are and how well you have trained. More than five minutes of sustained real fighting is enough to make you forget your form and resort to brutal survival.

At that point where stamina is everything. My breath came in gasps and my senses were heightened, making strikes I took much more painful but



equally making my own strikes more desperate and less controlled.

Standing in the knee-deep fast flowing water with slippery rocks, made for treacherous footing. This meant it was only a matter of time before I copped it.

And boy did we cop it. Despite ending up back-to-back, making a last stand, there were just too many of them, and they were much more controlled in their attacks. Coordinated and well-practiced.

A bad while later we were dragged to the bank to recover. The welts, bruises, and cuts on my body were superficial and not serious at all except they continually reminded me of my inadequacy and inability to prevent them, but they added to a new and growing sense of humbleness regarding this form of physical combat. It was unlike anything I had ever trained for before. In fact, all my training had been directed at short, sharp, hand-to-hand confrontations with the idea that it should end quickly and lethally. It was a lesson well learned.

Against a number of opponents, I had to draw on Aikido techniques and continually move to make the enemies obstruct each other and thus control how many attacks came at me at once. When I ran out of steam, it was over.

The rest of the day was even more difficult to bare. We were not given healing as promised and had to endure as they took us into various greenhouse type buildings set into the hillsides on the outskirts of the village. I got the impression that most of the Orcs buildings were burrowed into the side of the mountains, conjoined by an intersecting warren of tunnels. Each one of the greenhouses had magical light interspersed at varying intensities and had a vast array of different plants inside. Each representing different worlds that were known by the Orcs and had been or were under attack by the Reapers.

The assortment of plants considered immediately important were shown to us and their various uses were explained in great detail, which included healing benefits as well as detrimental effects such as poison, paralysis and so on. Each plant had quite distinctive features. They introduced us to the odor, taste, color and shapes of each, and the different phases of their life-cycle as well as the periods when they were most effective. After the short tour of each greenhouse, we were then grilled independently about how

much knowledge we retained. For every wrong answer we had to run around the village walls only to return and be shown again what we had gotten wrong. It wasn't a fair system either, because if I got something wrong, Raúl had to join me on the run, and similarly if he got something wrong I had to join him.

The running wasn't so bad as I was supremely fit now and well used to running, but with the hangover still looming in the back of my head as well as the beating we had endured, it made it almost unbearable. Raúl only joined me for those greenhouses that were new to him, but was excused from the ones he had already learned. During this time, I was taken at last to the Scalar home world greenhouse. Each greenhouse was an amazing repository of native life with different climates and zones replicated exactly to facilitate the various forms of life that were growing upon those worlds. A kind of botanical gardens. I began to respect the Orcs as green-fingered geniuses. Their herb lore was literally out of this world. When a certain grass was shown to have hydrating properties as well as the ability to act as a mild sedative. I surreptitiously took a little more than I should for one dose and during the quiz I deliberately got one wrong answer. On the subsequent run, I handed Raúl some of the grass and chewed some more myself. The relief was immediate and refreshing, and both Raúl and I were much better students thereafter. In between, we were fed, watered, and treated as new recruits. I had been through this drill many times and just took it in my stride. What else could I do?

Later that evening, we were left alone to rest and recover after a hearty meal. Both Raúl and I made straight for our bunks. The fresh air, high in this escarpment, and the busy day had us both exhausted and drained. We needed the sleep desperately.

Unfortunately, this was when J.B. visited us and he had someone with him I certainly wasn't expecting.

The knock on the outside wall of our hut elicited a groan from me. I had healed Raúl with my rejuvenation spell, but he could not do likewise for me. This left me even more drained and depleted than I had been and I was grumpily resigned to the fact that I needed to "acquire" more healing herbs with more lasting effects on the morrow. In the meantime I had just curled

up on my pallet and slipped into the place between worlds that sleep is so famous for. The dark oblivion of peace and respite to give my body a chance to heal and recuperate. The knocking resumed and I groggily shouted “Go away!”

When J.B. entered, he seemed far too excited for my mood.

“J.B. you are not welcome” I intoned ominously looking at the doorway. I was still curled up on my sleeping pallet and Raúl’s loud snores seemed to corroborate my statement wholeheartedly.

“Petros, it is imperative we speak. Please, I have someone here who you should meet.”

“imperative? What kind of word is that? Are you British? Actually, I wouldn’t be surprised, you have that demeanor.” I mocked lightly as I crawled out of bed to see whom he had brought with.

“British? what is that?” he inquired, his face deadpan and emotionless as if he were the Prince Charles of Wales himself.

“Nevermind, who is here? and can you heal me? I desperately need it.”

He motioned me to come out the door to the patio, and I went leaving Raúl to his slumber.

I walked out, and found to my disbelief a Scalar male standing in the torchlight, all four arms and three eyes of him patiently waiting for an introduction. He wore a sarong around his waist and his torso was bare, showing the very pronounced musculature of his race. Look at them guns! I thought but did not voice it. He seemed to scowl but with that third eye in the center of his forehead it made me kind of outstared and I felt compelled to look away. I did not know they were also here on Illuminous and was a little taken aback. To date, the only Scalar I had met were simulated creatures and besides the two kids we had rescued, they were all infected with the zombie flu and I had had to hack them to death or undeath, depending on how you looked at it.

After introductions, J.B. bless his soul healed me, and I felt well for the first time that day.

“I will never drink again” was echoing in the back of my thoughts and then I remembered it was one of the three great lies as J.B. brought out some cups and a jug and poured us a round. This drink was tart and sharp, nothing like the fruity punch I had had the night before and I downed it grimacing at the familiar burn. I declined a second round and waited expectantly at what we were meeting for. At this point in our preparations for the rescue mission, Major Gladstone had told me explicitly that we were to have no contact with the local Scalar under any circumstances, and that order was from up high in the Absinthe command structures. The decision to heal those kids at the house had been made spontaneously, and I felt it was a normal reaction by any sane person. I doubted Stone would have let us just abandon those kids, even if they were in the simulation. We had to show our human side after all.

“I believe you are going to be active in our world human Petros” said the strangely accented Scalar who had introduced himself as Shavestri. If I had to put a likeness to how he spoke, I would say he had an Indian accent. It was then that the penny dropped, and I gasped inwardly. How had I been so foolish. Shiva is an Indian god, one of the big three of their holy Triumvirate. The breaker of worlds and destroyer. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of it before. Did this have anything to do with the Scalar? It was so nearly a perfect match it couldn’t be a coincidence. Shavestri had four arms and three eyes as did Shiva. The middle eye was supposed to see into the soul. His skin was a grayish hue though and not blue as in the pictures I had seen of the Hindu God. Before my thoughts could divert me further, I was brought back to the present by J.B. answering for me.

“Yes, the human warriors will attempt a rescue at the prison, not two nights hence. They have someone of value there and so do we. I expect that your resistance will be able to create a diversion as we discussed?”

“It is so, it is so, but telling me please, when will you be able to send help? You know it has been fifty cycles since you last sought us out. We do

not fare well against the Reapers. Every day they take more life, capture more land. It is a slow and painful cancer upon our homeland. I have personally and much to my serious distaste, had to kill kin that have been consumed and changed by those Devourers. Many of us cry at their foul stench upon the winds and their unstoppable consumption of our lands.”

“Forgive me Shav, I am still new to this whole situation. I am also not the one in command. You should plan this with Major Gladstone. He will lead our team. Even Raúl probably knows more than me. Let me wake him up and he can join us.”

J.B. interrupted Shavestri’s reply, “Petros, you will lead this other mission. Leave your comrade to sleep. I have enchanted him so he sleeps soundly. That is why we are meeting. Major Gladstone’s mission is important of course, but Prince Horatio assures me you are more than capable to rescue Princess Adrienne. You are to rescue her and deliver her to Shavestri here. Let me show you.”

J.B. didn’t notice or perhaps chose not to notice my raised eyebrows. He delved into his robe and removed a fairly detailed map showing contours and positions of the area we would infiltrate to rescue our missing Prodigy.

“Here is the farmhouse where you were teleported from. Where Shavestri’s team will meet you is five gallops to the south. Before you ask, a gallop is a measurement of how far a Grist can gallop at full sprint in a regulated count to one hundred.” Journeyman Robert looked up and saw my puzzled expression hadn’t changed. “Oh forgive me, you humans use Kilometers as your unit of measurement. Let me think.... Okay, about four point seven kilometers. Do you follow?”

“Well, sure I do J.B., although I am curious what a Grist is?”

“One of our companion bearers. You must have seen them standing guard the last time you entered Illuminous? We passed several on our way out of the Tree City.”

“The horse-lion creatures are called Grist? That's a cool name. When can I ride one?”

“I fear we are getting off topic. How is it you are a leader in your world? You seldom take anything seriously and your attention span is more fleeting than a magical wisp in winter.” His waspish retort was an indication of the seriousness of our meeting.

I smiled wryly; *He was not the first to have said my attention was fleeting in my life. Despite the authoritarian lifestyle I had lived in, I had always chased the threads of thought my mind contrived to conjure as much as possible. The subconscious had a way of seeking things that built into credible intelligence if you followed those threads.*

“Sorry J.B. you must understand that everything I am doing here with you and the Absinthe or Ancients or Orcs and especially the Scalar is very new to me. I am learning as fast as possible and while my leadership skills are not really for me to determine or quantify, don't mistake my curiosity or lack of linear thinking as a sign of anything detrimental to our mission. I have survived many bad situations because of those exact traits and I am not changing now.”

J.B. nodded thoughtfully.

“Fair enough, now shall we get back to the leaves on this branch?”

I smiled. *I loved this guys idioms, always so apt and to the point.* He continued. The Scalar had a slight smile on his face too but drew his face back into a grimace when I noticed.

“Your infiltration will center on the Science complex. The caves extend from within it at the end of the valley. From your team's previous reconnaissance there are roughly two hundred Devourers and possibly two Reaper Officers. The vehicle that has been sent to retrieve the prisoners should arrive within the next five days. As you should know by now, the Reapers use air and spacecraft and have not yet learned the node travel that you will use to infiltrate that region.”

J.B. Looked at Shavestri and the Scalar moved in and took over the briefing.

“We know the complex extends at least seven levels below ground and that Princess Adrienne is kept at the very lowest level to prevent her signature magical essence from being identified clearly. Your fellow Prodigy will be held in one of the three levels above ground and since he has been there longer, will probably be in a terrible state. You will need to make sure that you can heal him, otherwise he will not survive the rescue. Also consider this, that parts of him may have been cut off and are being kept cryogenically alive in case he escapes. They do this so that they can feed the body part to a Devourer and the escaped prisoner will be changed, no matter where he is. For this reason alone, the security will be lax.”

“We don’t think the Princess has been interrogated yet, as she is a prize worthy of one of the Reaper Lords. The Reaper Officers will know that and will protect her from their own minions and anyone else trying to rescue her. Destroy them and the entire complex to destroy any evidence of your team’s involvement. Our own team will leave explosives here and here...” He showed several points along the periphery of the complex on the map, “...and you will have to choose which ones are easiest to get during your insertion phase.”

I held up my hand to interrupt. “So does Major Stone know about the explosives? What type of explosives are they? What detonators will they have and while we have trained for insertion, there is precious little information about the site itself? Do you have blueprints?” I looked up at Shavestri and it was his turn to hold a quizzical look. With three eyes, it was mesmerizing looking him in the face. It reminded me of those optical illusions that tricked your eyes into wanting to see something that wasn’t there. I kept blinking to get my eyes to focus correctly.

“If you mean the building structural plans, then we have something like that, although I do not have them here with me. My people built it primarily as an educational and scientific research station. We used it to explore and research the cavern depths and the various geological formations unique to

that mountain range. I can leave copies at the explosive drop points if that will help.” he replied.

“The explosives are a Trillin base chemical, with a 100 count detonator. You only need to press the button, and after a count of 99 they will detonate. Each of the packages will contain enough explosives to level the building and collapse most of the cavern structures within, as well as most of the hillside the structure is built on. You will have to place the explosives on the lowest levels at the structural base within the caverns. I can have those indicated on the... blueprint as you called it.”

I stared at them both incredulously. Gritting my teeth and holding my exasperation in-check I tried to get across to these two aliens what I was thinking, because while this was exciting and new for me, it was seeming less and less likely that it would succeed.

“This mission is less than ideal. It will all go to hell if we don’t have those plans and if it’s as complicated as you describe, I would prefer the blueprints sooner. Major Stone told me it was a three-story complex with a maximum of ten rooms only and mentioned nothing about caves. I take it the building is constructed against these caves you mention?”

“Yes, the building covers the cave entrance which lead to the deeper floors. The three-level complex is built above them.” explained Shavestri

“Excuse my French, but how the fuck are we supposed to pull this off? We are six people with swords and clubs, without projectile weapons and while we have magic, it’s new to me and limited in the others of our team. I’m getting a bad feeling about this and I really don’t like keeping anything from the chain of command. You would need a full company of troops with modern weapons and air support to crack this nut.” I stated with exasperation and a growing sense of unease. I was used to compiling and presenting full briefings once the intel had been assimilated, and the operators I presented to would be howling in indignation if I presented nothing less than full intelligence. This was anything but a full briefing and the intelligence summation rounded to a big fat zero.



“How do you expect me to keep this secret from the other team members? They will need to help me in every way they can to get this close to even remotely successful.”

“Unfortunately, Petros, we have only you. Prince Horatio assures me...”

“Prince Horatio can go to hell in a hand-basket!” I raised my voice. “He’s not the one putting his arse on the line..., and you guys have loads of troops and ability. Why aren’t you going?”

J.B.’s stoic face didn’t flinch, in fact, it got sterner.

“Prince Horatio assures me you have the ability. With the additional training you will receive here over the next day, he is confident that you can pull off the raid. You need not kill everyone you meet and with the Dark spells you will learn, it should be relatively easy to sneak in and out with ample time to spare. Do not give up before you have even attempted the rescue.”

His face pinched as a painful thought came to him. “Our King is bedridden, he ails Petros. His life is meaningless without his daughter. Please do not give up. You really are our last hope.”

I wanted to walk away then; it was the strongest feeling, and I might have, if not for Shavestri.

“Colonel Petros, we have faced down the Reapers for over 100 years. As they encroach across our land, our world is being consumed. We have lost and never once gained back anything they have taken. In some places, we have held our ground. This would be the first tangible blow we give to them in taking something back from them. The first time we walk away with a win. You will free your comrade with our help and free the Princess, and perhaps in the process even if you don’t free the other prisoners there, those who are my poor brethren, you will at least free them in spirit and their age of torture will be lessened. For that alone, your men will be honored above all others by my people.”

“You have many people in the place?” I asked, caught up in his pain and knowing if it was me, I would not rest until I had them all free.

“We do not know how many, because it is very hard to know if someone has been turned or taken. When they are turned into a Devourer, it is very hard to tell who they once were, unless from clothing, or perhaps some unique feature.”

“Have you seen the Devourers? They injure themselves to find food; they don’t care about anything unless under the control of an officer. Who they have in that jail is really unknown, but whoever is left in there deserves to die with some semblance of honor. The explosives will completely destroy that place and destroy them too. They won’t be turned into devourers. It is a blessing. ”

“Look, I will help you both as best as I can. For what it's worth, I will do my best to extract anyone and everyone that has a reasonable chance at escape. What I don’t understand is why you aren’t going through the correct channels, using the Ancients and working with the rest of my squad.”

“The Ancients have written off Princess Adrienne as an unavoidable loss.” said J.B. “They believe that returning her to us, will upset the Reapers and cause them to be much more aggressive and active. They fear that by freeing her, their own complicit overtures in aiding us and yourselves will become widely known and cause a ripple effect that might lead the Reapers to our world and the discovery of planar travel. The Ancients political structure is opposed to direct intervention and the Reaper Lords use the threat of annihilation on the Ancients should they change this outlook. If the Reapers gain the knowledge that there is an inner faction of Ancients, the ones you call the Absinthe, working towards their destruction, then they will take direct action against the Ancients. It will cause chaos and widespread destruction and may wipe out our benefactors.

“You not saying anything that encourages the path we are choosing,” I said forlornly. “Are we not dooming ourselves and them in this one act of kindness? Is it really worth it?”

“This one act of kindness, as you put it, will restore our nations’ monarch to full faculty, additionally it will give the Scalar people a hope that the foe can be beaten after a hundred years of persecution and untold numbers of casualties. Last but not least, it will rip out the root of a relentless enemy. If the raid goes off as expected, then you will be wiping all evidence of the human presence in the explosion anyway. The presence of the Scalar raiding party will give credence to the idea that they were the ones to mount the raid. Perhaps it is they who will reap the harvest of the Reapers displeasure. The less anyone knows about it, the better.” I saw Shav nodding in agreement.

“You still have not explained why you don’t send your own warriors to do this? Your troops, combined with the Orcs and whoever else lives in this land could probably make short work of these Devourers.”

“On this world, we would make a strong standing because we are tied to the land and the Illuminous Lodestones. However, on a different world, we are too far from our source of power to be much use. Humans are the only species in existence who can tap into any planets magical energies without serious inhibition to their latent magical ability. Additionally our auras, I mean all the races of Illuminous will shine extremely brightly to the Devourers senses and so it is almost impossible for us to hide from them or surprise them.”

“And yes, your aura will also shine brightly, but that is why you are here and also so crucial to this mission. One of the books I gave you will teach you a spell of how to dampen your aura significantly such that you can pass almost undetected throughout the complex. Invisible from sight and senses. The same spell does works on us, but not as well as on humans.”

“The Orcs are masters of the Dark and Fire, and you will need to boost these skills to be of use to your team. Both you and Raúl will be sent inside the jail fortress because you both possess the prerequisite spells and abilities. The others in your team will maintain security while the pair of you move in, infiltrate and rescue Malabourne, and then you Petros, on your own, will have to infiltrate further to secure and release the Princess. I suggest that you task Raúl with planting the explosives at that juncture so that everyone can escape leaving no trace of your presence.”

“How will I explain the Princess to the rest of the team?” I asked what I thought to be the obvious question and considering how blasé J.B. was about going around the chain of command, it was clear he knew nothing about our military tactics and the level of trust we built as small team special forces operators. There was just no way this would go down without my team being in on the WHOLE plan.

As if reading my mind J.B. replied “She will be a happy coincidence. The whole idea of you sneaking in to plant the explosives and retrieve Malabourne is that suggested by my King and his advisors working with the intelligence provided by the Scalar and the Absinthe. He knew that the Absinthe would not risk retrieving his daughter but would be keen to extract the Prodigy human before he is interrogated further. Their own complicit exploits would come under scrutiny when the human broke and released all their secret dealings. Whereas another Elf lost to carelessness was hardly a concern of theirs.”

I was once again startled at the seemingly discordant nature of the relationship between the Elder Elves and the Absinthe. Especially considering that the Absinthe were the ones taking the biggest risk by supporting and aiding everyone I had met in this hodge-podge mish-mash of alien species or races or sapients or whatever. It was the Absinthe’s own technology after all that was ensuring everyone was still surviving. It also seemed to me that the Elves were bereft and willing to do anything to get their addled King back to full health. I could not begrudge them that. I also knew that the Absinthe could monitor my thoughts and conversations while I was within a Sim, but could not do the same level of monitoring when I was “in the flesh” so to speak.

*It seemed like J.B. knew and was taking advantage of the flaw to get this intelligence to me while I was unfettered to my Absinthe handler. How I would share it with the others in my team without the Absinthe knowing would be a tricky and dicey endeavor. Lucky for me, that was exactly what I had been trained for. After all, when one deals with the CIA, JSOC, NSA, MI6, Mossad and the myriad of other acronyms out there, one learns to keep the cards you are dealt close to the chest. As far as poker goes, I was shaping up to have a straight, not a great hand, but not a bad one either,*

*and you never knew what your opponent was dealt and that was why it was called gambling, the outcome was never a certainty, only a probability.*

We discussed the finer details of the plan; I asked questions, and Shavestri told me what he could and promised to provide the rest of the information I requested within a day. When the meeting finished, I joined in for a final toast.

Shavestri started it off, “With the blessings of Shiva may his hand bring destruction upon our foes.”

I interjected with a quote from General George S. Patton, “The object of war is not to die for your country, but to make the other bastard die for his.” to which J.B. added a quote from his King Abalone, “When the rot runs deep, dig it up, cut it out and replant for the best chance of success.”

These proved to be prophetic words that would come back to haunt us all.

# CHAPTER 24

## BETRAYAL

The following day ran a lot smoother with no hangover to battle through, and I found my mind much clearer on what I had to train for. Raúl was non-the-wiser regarding J.B.'s unannounced visit the previous evening, and I left it that way for now.

The brutal morning regime comprised fighting, getting beaten and then fighting some more until we had nothing left. We were pushed beyond our limits of control and exhaustion, then we were summarily revived, healed and recharged with stamina for some more of the same. I had had a lot of physical training over the years, and the martial arts elements were all put to the test.

We used Aikido and Judo the most against the unrelenting waves of Orc warriors, but there were elements of Krav Maga, the Israel Defence Forces' own style of Jujitsu which they had exposed me to during my stint with the SAS. It is incredibly effective when one is surprised by a threat and the subsequent follow up to those threats usually put the opponent out of the fight very quickly. It also disarms them quickly.

The fewer Orcs with swords or staffs swinging in our general direction was a blessing we both appreciated considerably. In my early years during the South African bush war as a Recce, I had learned a very effective mantra that I would chant in my mind relentlessly. The long version of which was in Afrikaans slang "Skop, skiet en donner" meaning kick, shoot, and beat. I later changed it to "Hit first, fast". The unavoidable acronym "HFF" became my internal chant, as each Orc received my fired up enthusiasm.

When your mind was geared right, then there was very little that could get near you. I had used this mantra throughout my years in the various armed forces and taught more than a few of those I had trained to embrace

it for when they were stretched to their limits. Hit first, fast became, for want of a better word a “hit” with the Delta Force guys, but didn’t really catch on with the SEALs.

They had a more cautious approach, whereby if you were hitting your opponent, then you had most likely failed your mission. The emphasis for SEALs being silent and undetected infiltration. A few had taken it on, however, and subsequently excelled at the various assassination assignments they meted out.

All fighting was mental first. Your mind had to be in the moment. Your thoughts still, with very little parallel thinking going on. Training built in the muscle memory and you found yourself completing amazing blocks, parries, and ripostes if you just let your mind run with the unplanned responses. What this did for my leveling was quite pleasing.

I had leveled up in Hand-to-hand as well as a host of other physical skills. Weapon use also skyrocketed, and I wondered to myself yet again how gratifying to actively see your own skill levels increase numerically and then for the accumulation of those results to add to your overall rank.

All of it controlled by little nanobots synced to my brain and accumulating all the requisite experience and knowledge that could be converted into physical upgrades and advanced responses. I would only get those upgrades once I had connected to the Ranking level-up node, and that was in a day or two. I suspected I might even hit level 25 overall, which meant I would get more points to add to my Abilities. One of those Abilities that I needed much more of was definitely Stamina. I would keep that in mind when the time came.

The afternoon was a different kind of grind. This time was dedicated to the Shamans. Shaman Bab took a personal interest in me despite assigning an acolyte to deal with my basic tutelage. She took great pleasure in finding any way to humiliate me and my fumbling in dark magic gave her every opportunity.

I took it in my stride. Shaman Bab had a lot to learn about heckling troops. The drill sergeants I knew would have eaten Bab for breakfast, but she came a close second.

*Funny how my mind drifted to food whenever she berated me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it and had to focus more on lifting my eyes to meet hers. I kept finding new tattoo swirls and studs where I was sure there had been none before. I found them... mesmerizing. I must stress that I am referring to the studs and swirls, not the...other attributes.*

I had read and absorbed the information in the two books J.B. had given me before I slept the night before. One was as he had hinted at, a spell called Darken Aura in the first book which I absorbed with little difficulty, but the second book really interested me. It was a spell of map making. How it worked exactly was beyond me. It created a map in the mind's eye that allowed me to navigate real time in any given place. Literally, I could close my eyes and see the map of an area I envisaged and a little glowing dot would pulse indicating my position on the map. If I knew the area and had been there, then the relevant landmarks would be shown and labeled. If I knew about an area from third-party sources, then the area was greyed out until I actually went there to confirm the information. If I saw the area from a distance, it was also reflected in grey scale, with clarity for those particular landmarks I had noted.

The most amazing thing about it was how it showed friends and foes. Apparently, foes would show up as red dots, whereas unknown items or random beings would show up as orange and yes you guessed it, green for friendlies. It was a constantly evolving and changing creation that seemed to not only record my immediate surroundings but also places I had been to. For instance, I could zoom out to get a grand sense of the size of Illuminous, much of it being blacked out under the fog-of-war concept and lo-and-behold, the areas I had been to in the Tree City were in clear full definition. I could zoom in and see the tree I had first appeared at, and similarly could navigate through the city on the exact path I had walked with Horatio right up to the Grand Library and Palace. It was a marvel to behold and a priceless addition to what we would need for the infiltration of the Scalar Scientific Education research station.

Upon absorbing the book, a small sheet of paper had detached itself and floated wantonly to the floor. I had grasped it in haste, thinking perhaps the book was damaged, but instead found it to be a note from Horatio.



Dear Colonel Petros,

I trust this note finds you well and that the two books I have sent for you will aid you in your endeavors. I find myself swamped with my father's duties as his ailment has taken a serious turn for the worse. As a result, I have dispatched Journeyman Robert to bestow these gifts upon you. He will facilitate your training with the Orcs and ensure your progress is as it should be.

I have incorporated this note so that only you can find it. With this ominous portent I must stress the need for secrecy as some of my people might find my musings treasonous.

I have been having second thoughts regarding this rescue mission. Everything is falling into place nicely, but it is the ease with which we are able to attain the relevant information that worries me. I have no definitive evidence to support the unease and it may just be the anxiousness I feel for my father's health and of course the plight of my sister. When she returns, I would be more than happy to relinquish some of my duties to her so that I can be a carefree prince once again. I have no love for the trappings of power and intrigue.

After my sister was captured, I dreamed of her almost every night. Within each dream, she is accosted and consumed by the Devourers. That is until I met you. When you left Illuminous, I began dreaming a different dream. In this dream, she is again accosted, but this time you are present and each situation is slightly different but somehow each challenge you meet head-on and you manage to save her and rescue her. In my life, it has not been often that I dream of events and it is because of this that I bring it up. Not because I believe in these dreams, although our line does have the ability to get glimpses of the future. What I want to say is that it has never been this clear. While I am no expert in these matters, I feel you are being set up.

The map maker spell is something unique that only a handful of us on Illuminous have. Its very nature is counter to all the security we muster, and

as such this spell is not shared to all and sundry. You are the first human to have access to it.

I trust you will use it wisely and be wary, my friend. I think all is not right with this plan that my father and his advisers have set in play.

Come back safely.

Yours in good faith

Prince Horatio

The note dissolved into the ether shortly after I had read it and I was left with troubling thoughts as I slept fitfully.

# CHAPTER 25

## DEATH

“Why are you just standing there Petros Tongue Taker?” intoned Bab’s ominous, husky voice. “You should clear your thoughts, not muddle them up!”

I sighed inwardly and began once again the relaxation techniques Horatio and J.B. had taught me, but for some reason being in the flesh it was a lot harder to grasp those peaceful accepting vibes. They were like wisps of smoke, ethereal and random as they floated by, and becoming one with them was more and more difficult, the harder I tried.

Eventually, she grabbed me from the seated position I was in and began thwacking me with a cudgel she had. Not debilitating blows, but painful none-the-less. I tried to block them, but she stopped mid-strike and scolded me.

“The pain is for you to endure. Now FOCUS on your meditation and allow the blows to become as nothing.”

Well, if I thought it was hard to find my inner peace before, I was finding it damn nigh impossible now. However, after the first dozen strikes, I found the pain stopped. Not from any sort of healing but instead from my own inner psyche responding naturally to the situation and placing a force barrier around my body to protect me from the stinging blows. At last, I had tapped into my subconscious and it had known what to do all along. I realized that forcing it to do something would never work and that the inner mind is really a mind of its own, that knows your needs even before you do. This inner mind would protect you if you let it, but you could not order it or make it conform to your will. It was actually the one in charge, and you had to subdue your will to allow the inner mind to express what must be done. With this breakthrough and realization, I began to transcend.

Babs stopped beating on me and through her grim visage, I saw the makings of a smile. Not a full-bodied toothy smile, more like a twitch or muscle spasm. But I saw it and it gave me hope for mastering my abilities. The Shaman taught me how to tap into my dark side. How to use two new spells and helped me double down on the fire based spells that I already knew by adding elements of air and darkness. I wasn't able to practice the unleashing of the magic, but I had the loading up part of the spells perfected under her special brand of tutelage.

The night came swiftly as it always did in mountainous regions. Once the sun was behind the silhouettes of the peaks, it became dark almost immediately. This night, a tempest had arrived in the form of dark swirling clouds with streaks of lightning and the grumblings of full and swollen clouds banging together. The smell of ozone was in the air and a feeling of hope and renewal pervaded all. Everyone had a spring in their step and the excitement was palpable.

Raúl and I were together again for this phase. He had been training separately from me the whole afternoon. His ability being more advanced perhaps they tested him in other ways. Right now we were training on the same thing.

An exercise to put our newly acquired and improved talents to good use. The mission was to infiltrate the Orc village while they expected us. We had to capture J.B. who was a reluctant hostage let it be said, and get him to the Arena before dawn. Everything we had trained for these last two days, combined with our previous training, was geared towards us successfully obtaining the objective and getting him to theoretical safety.

The mission was pretty simple as far as I could tell. If we both cloaked ourselves in darkness, dampened our auras and used the invisibility spell, then we had a very good chance of pulling this off. Where the challenge lay was being able to cloak someone else whose aura was not easily dampened. J.B. being that someone who would hopefully assist by complying with our movements and instructions. Without knowing his response, we had to plan for all situations, so we had a little surprise in store for him. I could see his stern disapproval now as I imagined his expression when our plan came

together. Okay, I watched the A-Team, it was in the 80s. People were allowed a little escapism back then.

The trick of it all was to maintain our mana levels so that all these spells could work. I had a fairly large reserve, but Raúl's was smaller and so it fell upon me to do the additional spells on J.B.. With that in mind, we had to conserve our mana as much as possible before we arrived at the village and that was proving harder and harder to do with all the roving patrols actively seeking us out. They knew we started from the Arena and so the area for them to patrol was a pretty narrow cordon.

Now, being the sneaky operatives that we were, both Raúl and I hauled ass to get well clear of the Arena and then using Raúl's knowledge of the hills we circumvented the traditional path which Lord Groggar had all the Orcs patrolling and watching avidly. The tracks we left headed initially North. Directly to their lines of defense. We then veered West off the known path, deliberately leaving tracks to entice them to spread their forces even thinner as they sent out patrols to intercept us and then after a short detour, we returned East to cross over the path once again, continuing East, only to track back again but this time remain on the eastern side of the path, running parallel and heading straight North to the village, instead of following the winding path exactly. It meant we had to climb cliffs, descend ravines and leopard crawl through thick scrub and grasslands which all took considerable time, but with a bit of line and an operators knowledge, we made short work of it. The spells hid our auras when we were in plain sight without cover, and the inclement weather helped cloak any sounds we made. The spells kept us invisible from casual observation and when in cover, I used the cloak of concealment without magic, allowing my mana to recharge when I could. My boots of silence made not a sound on the rocky ground, but they could not silence the sound of gravel shifting as you put weight on it, nor could they silence the rasp of grass or shrubs as they brushed against my clothes. In those instances, I had to slow down considerably. Raúl also had boots of silence, but I had to endure his Superman jokes about my cloak of shadows. I knew it was his way of dealing with the fact that he didn't have one (yet - as he put it).

Three hours of the laborious creeping and sneaking and some very close calls came and went, as the Orcs attempted to track us and widened their patrols to box us in.

Time passed and Lord Groggar contracted his forces to the village and its surroundings, realizing we had passed his pickets, thus concentrating the number of eyes in the smallest area.

We came upon the village from the Northern side, having circled around. Our approach was from higher up the valley heading south along the stream. It was here that I realized how ingenious the wall was. As a tangled jumble of rocks, it didn't look like much, but if you tried to climb it, there was no way that you could do it without creating a racket. The loose rocks would cascade and the exercise would be over the moment they pinpointed us. We would not go down as Earth's finest warriors discovered by mythical Orcs. It just wouldn't do.

So we tapped into our operator knowledge and got ourselves wet. We were supreme frogmen, and we had lots of experience in this particular stream. We slipped into the stream and floated down towards the wall; It was the final barrier with a hectic underwater swim through a tunnel. It was the only area that had been solidly constructed and the tunnel ensured we had to hold our breath to go through. We knew the tunnel was only about five meters long and at most, one and a half meters deep. We would insert with a deep breath then sink below the surface and enter one-by-one, feet first.

Raúl went first being the smaller, and impatiently I followed, after a suitable wait. I hyperventilated my lungs to extract carbon dioxide and filled them with fresh oxygen. I should have waited longer.

The stream funneled into the tunnel and the rushing water forced me through several rocky bumps within it until I impacted something softer than the rocks. I was about to get physical and struggle when the soft body was forced from me and I streamed into the gap it had created. The rocks closed around me and I jammed solid. The rocks forcing my legs through but my hips caught between two solid rocks and despite the pressure of the water flowing against me and around me, I couldn't budge. I knew this was a divers worst nightmare. Trapped in a cave, stuck and without air. I fell

back on my training. Relax, evaluate and respond. I was being buffeted as the water squeezed past me, the pressure building and pushing me further into the narrow gap, grating my hip painfully. Against all SEAL training, we had assumed instead of confirmed. The soft body I had impacted must have been Raúl. I had dislodged him then. The panic built again. Raúl was smaller than me, and he had been jammed. How was I possibly going to get out? The panic surged.

Magic made one feel invincible. “Careless!” I reflected ruefully that my first mistake would be my last, as was usually the case in this business. The need for air was increasing. I could hold my breath well over four minutes and only a minute had passed. My autonomic nervous system seemed to forget that and screamed for that gulp of air.

I had to rein it in. Don’t panic, find a solution. I could see nothing in the rushing dark water, but I could feel the slimy rocks I was wedged between. I knew that movement would cause carbon dioxide to build up in my bloodstream and cause my breathing reflex to gulp for air. Few people know that our need for air was not want for oxygen, but rather, a bodily response regarding the amount of carbon dioxide that needed to be expelled. Once the threshold was reached your body insisted that you breathe. Initially, it could be overridden. The mind, after all, is in charge. When you started to fade and blackout, well then, the autonomic system took over and you breathed no matter what.

Two minutes and I was, if anything, only more stuck. When faced with your death as often as I had been, it was supposed to get easier. Like an old friend who stops in for a drink. The grim reaper, sickle poised to cut the life chord. How had I gotten so careless? I would never have inserted into an unknown like this if I had had time to plan this mission properly. Instead, we had gotten cocky and assumed the tunnel was clear.

Magic was useless in this environment. I didn’t know any water magic that could help me and other magic didn’t work easily when I was immersed in water. The pressure to breathe was increasing. My internal gulping was harder to control. If I fought the current, I would just drain myself of stamina. A red blinking light showed in my closed-eye vision. I

was out of options and not sure what to do; the panic was building. I would be forced to breathe soon.

When the touch came, I almost jumped out of my skin. I felt something or someone grab my foot. It began to pull me with increasing strength, and I could feel my body being compressed by the inexorable forces of an immovable object facing an unstoppable force. I was being squished painfully. The combined effort of the pull and the pressure of the water from upstream was working, but like a square being forced through a circle, it was damaging me.

I felt my hips crushed and grated painfully, then they were through, next I felt a snap, each rib compressing like an accordion and more than a couple broke with piercing stabbing pain, and as the rushing water and the person pulling me downstream continued to force me through a hole I was never built for, the rest cracked too, compressing my chest, and forced all the last strands of air out of me.

Internally I felt something tear and a surge of power then it was gone and I gasped finally, unable to control my breathing reflex anymore

The water poured in. The blackness of hopelessness engulfed me. The pulsing red light in my vision dimmed suddenly to nothing, and my head cracked against a rock jarring my senses as I was buffeted to unconsciousness while my lungs filled with water instead of the oxygen they craved for. I thought of opportunities lost and let go into the grateful release from all the pain.

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# CHAPTER 26

## TEARFUL FAREWELL

My darkness evaporated into a sporadic fit of coughing. I sat up and vomited, heaved and vomited more. The cough produced copious amounts of phlegm and fluid, and between the vomiting, I coughed and wheezed like a box-a-day smoker. I felt someone's hands on my back pressing to assist me. A sharp pain coursed through my ribcage and I got the coppery taste of blood in my mouth. Disorientated, I was about to speak but the wracking cough took that from me. Eventually, after what seemed like an age, my vision cleared and I noticed people around me. The first person who swam into my tear-streaked vision was Journeyman Robert. His concerned expression told me all I needed to know about my state of health. He leaned down and using his magic sent a wave of healing through me. It was blessed relief and helped me gain strength to cough out the rest of the river along with the blood from my now healing lung. The bones painfully realigned themselves and I felt my hip and pelvis creak and crack to adjust as the magic coursed its way through me.

I was in a pitiful state and when finally after the magic had run its course and I had gained enough strength; I looked up to see Lord Groggar, Shaman Bab, and the rest of the orcs arrayed around me. Their concerned expressions left me feeling worse, and I bowed my head in defeat. They had caught me dead to rights, pardon the pun, and my clever trick of insertion through the stream had backfired mightily. I wasn't sure what happened if we failed, but it couldn't be good. The Orcs were masterful at making one regret wrong actions. And now with this foolhardy situation, I had not only endangered myself but also Raúl, who had been lucky to get through. I looked around to find my good buddy, who had saved me by dragging me through against all odds.

Slowly looking around, I realized Raúl was nowhere to be seen. For that matter, J.B. was missing too.

Lord Groggar was tapping his foot impatiently, my recovery had taken at least ten minutes when he noticed me looking around for my companions and suddenly realization dawned and he started shouting at his troops. They all made off in different directions and I too finally realized what had happened. Raúl, bless his soul had saved me, probably done CPR, even with my cracked ribs, then fetched J.B. to heal me, he had probably made as much noise as he could, making sure everyone knew how serious the situation was, to which the Orc's obliged seeing I was wounded. Now amidst the confusion, he had slipped away with the prize. He was probably hauling arse to the extraction site right now. I could only smile. That roguish Latino had outsmarted everyone. I began to chuckle.

"You are the distraction?" mused Groggar. His face a frown.

I stood up, still wracked with fits of coughing and what was intermittent laughter. "Yes,... (cough, cough), yes. It's brilliant. You guys trained him well (cough, cough), but I think we trained him well first. The mission comes first, always."

Groggar had a wry smile on his hippo face and then slapped me on the back none too gently, helping me cough out the last fragments of fluid.

"Very good!" his voice boomed. "Let us go meet them and then we can celebrate your victory." He gave me an amused but somehow condescending look. "It was a good plan. It nearly got you killed, but it was a good plan. How did you fit through there?" he said, indicating the tunnel. "You humans are too skinny. Need fattening up."

The irony dripping from his voice was hard to wipe away. I nodded graciously, but he was right. I had learned a valuable lesson tonight. It would stand me in good stead.

Raúl and J.B. were waiting for us at the arena. Raúl was grinning and the Orcs all around were shuffling their feet annoyed. In the end, it turns out we didn't have to use magic, at least not a lot. It had all been skullduggery, a masterful move by my inventive teammate. His absolute focus to achieve

the objective was a landmark trait of why he was a fine operator and a very fine soldier to have at my side.

Arriving at the arena, we exchanged a concerned glance, and I nodded showing I was fine and then it was back to all smiles. Lord Groggar gave some long speech about how wonderful we were and that it had been an honor to train us, blah blah... I have to admit my mind was drifting. After dying and being revived less than an hour ago, I still had a lot on my mind. While the simulations had all felt very real when I died in them, this instance felt surreal. It was as if things had happened to someone else and I was just a spectator. That I was dissociated from the experience. During BUDS, part of the SEAL training there is a phase where we are tied-up and submerged until we succumb underwater, but the revival happened within seconds. nothing like what I had just experienced. I had felt myself expire, drift away, become nothing. I wondered if this could be counted as a near-death experience and how long my heart had stopped beating and where I would be now if it wasn't for magical healing. I owed J.B. a lot for that and Raúl too for saving my arse.

J.B. sidled up to me and said, "You were a splinter from death when Raúl brought me to you. It nearly drained me to heal you. I am relieved to see you well again. But one good thing that has come from all this is that you can no longer call me J.B."

"What?" I asked coming back from my morbid mood. "Sorry J.B., what did you say?"

"I said you can no longer call me J.B." stated Journeyman Robert with glib amusement.

"Oh really? And why is that?" I asked, equally glibly. This was the most animated I had ever seen J.B.

"Well..." he replied "I received word earlier this evening from Lord Horatio that due to his own elevation in responsibilities, it is equally important that I get elevated in title to suit his new station as his right-hand

man. So, as of now, I am an Adeptus of the Arcanum. I have been elevated at long last.”

He was literally beaming in pride and the good news helped me shift my focus from the morbid thoughts of my recent death.

“That's great news Adeptus Robert!” I stated solemnly. “Very good news. Congratulations on your promotion. Although you do realize it makes it much easier to remember.”

He turned to me, looking puzzled. “It does?” he asked. “How so?”

With a wicked grin, I said “Well I’m terrible with names, so, as you know A is the first letter of the alphabet, so instead of J.B. I can now call you A.B.”

His face dropped and assumed the pinched stern-faced disapproval I had come to recognize as his go-to face when dealing with me. It was all I needed to get my enthusiasm for life back in order. If A.B. was disapproving of me, then all was right with the world again. I squeezed his shoulder.

“Seriously though, I am really grateful what you did for me. Thank you.”

His face kept the pinched look, but I saw a slight relaxation of the eyes as he took my gratitude to heart.

“Don’t mention it,” he mumbled.

After the pleasantries, Raúl and I were guided back by a procession of Orcs and A.B. to the spot we had arrived a few days previous. Lord Groggar surprised me by giving me a big boisterous hug in farewell and some sage advice. “Beware my friend, you are too reckless with your life. A failure brings more future success than any achievement ever could. Learn and be wiser” With those prophetic words, he pushed me away to give a hug and similar advice to Raúl and beside him, Shaman Babs was scowling

at me. I moved forward to give her a hug too, but she backed away, hand out before her.

“No, you don’t. You keep your eyes to yourself Tongue Taker and your arms at your sides besides. I won’t have you touching my divine being.” I was sure that I saw a crinkle of amusement in her face though, despite her stern words.

“Go and be well. Let our training be absorbed and your days be more productive.”

Nodding at her, then at A.B. and a final wave to Lord Groggar and the Orcs I stepped back, where Raúl and I moved out to meet the red portal orb due to arrive any minute.

“Wait!” came a feminine shout as I noticed a woman Orc running to join us. The Orcs all around went immediately silent, and the lady walked through them all as they opened a path for her. She had been running hard and in her hands, she had what looked like a necklace made of flowers or leaves. I stood there looking at her puzzled. It was then that I realized she was Lord Groggar’s daughter. I had met her the night of the banquet. Lord Groggar moved to stand in front of her, obstructing my view. Whatever was said, I could see he was unhappy, but that she would not be denied. He moved aside at her insistence, and she walked towards me tentatively. The closer she got, the more I thought I should recall her name, but could not. Damn that fruit punch. I was sure, yes... a memory surfaced. She had been leading me by the hand. It faded as soon as it surfaced and my puzzled expression looked dumbfounded as she placed the necklace of flowers around my neck and kissed me on the cheek.

Her beautiful youthful face flushed as she whispered, “Petros, I will miss you, please come back to me...” she stammered then amended, “... come back to us” more assertively.

My surprise could not have been more pronounced had a meteorite struck me on the forehead. Despite my eternal vigilance and internal control of all my emotions, I doubted I could have masked the confused expression that now played across my face for all to see. I looked up from her face and

saw Lord Groggar's disapproving and sad look and Raúl's mischievous smile to the side. I did not understand what had just happened, but I didn't want to be distracted further.

"Umm, thank you," I stammered. "I will try my best."

She looked at me uncertainly. Her brow creased to 'confused' then the spark of anger flitted across her face. She gritted her teeth. I was witnessing a thunderstorm in the making. Raúl came close and called me aside. I left them standing where they were and he quickly brought me up to speed.

"She has committed to you Armpit. You have to give her something in return to equalize the imbalance."

"But why?" I enquired, still befuddled. "What do you mean committed to me?"

"Don't you remember Hombre? That first night you promised her she was the most beautiful woman you had ever seen. It was love at first sight. You went looking for her room after the banquet. I tried to stop you, but I had a little love nest arranged for myself and you seemed to be very fired up bro. I didn't see you for the rest of the night. Surely you remember?"

I stood transfixed. Another flashback of her naked body writhing beneath my grasping hands, her searching mouth and amorous kisses. The smell of flowers pervading my senses. Her strong arms and supple form conforming to my own. The unleashing of weeks of pent up emotion and passion. I turned back to see the silent group of Orcs waiting for me. *Tough crowd*, I thought in a moment of levity totally incongruent to the situation.

"Um.. forgive me. I'll be with you shortly." I soothed diplomatically, putting my hands up placatingly. Then I grabbed Raúl close and whispered in desperation, "What's her name?"

He chuckled maliciously and said, "What stud? you don't remember?" then taking pity on me as I gave him a hateful glare said, "Garrina." and just like that, a few more memories crashed back into place.

I now remembered I had gone to her after her very forward advances, my mind filled with lust and longing. The booze and party atmosphere had all played its part. I remember we planned to meet after the banquet in her room and she had given me more drink. I had not resisted. After that, after those first few kisses and the closeness of our bodies, my memory got hazy again. This lovely young creature, a daughter of Groggar, no less the Princess of the Orcs had bedded me, not the other way around. Surely she knew that. There was no way I could commit to someone I barely knew. W.T.F. I thought inwardly. What The FUCK!

Steeling myself, I turned back to the audience and stepped forward to hug her, but it was too late. She had the largest and most mesmerizing eyes. They were brimming with tears; she didn't move a muscle. The tears increased, but she didn't move, just looked at me with that hurt and betrayed look and I felt like such a dick. *WTF* I admonished myself again. *This wasn't supposed to happen.* I tried to say something. Anything that could make things right, but her humiliation and sadness could not be stilled.

Eventually, Bab swooped in and giving me the stink-eye put a cloak around her shuddering shoulders. It was then that I noticed that she was wearing a beautiful gown and that her hair had been shaped and neatened. Everyone else that was here had been up all night doing the training exercise with us. She must have gotten up particularly early and rushed to give me this parting gift. *I was such a dick.*

"Wait, Garrina...." I called. She turned to me, sniffing now, but eyes still swimming in tears.

"Forgive me, I have no family. I have no sense of these types of things. I promise I will come to see you the next time I am in Illuminous, and if the timing is right. I will be able to spend time with you and talk to you more, and I will bring you a gift worthy to balance the scales. Will that be okay?"

Her eyes brightened, and she broke from Bab's protective hug to immerse herself in my arms. Then, without saying another word, turned and rushed away. The awkward silence as Lord Groggar stared at me left me feeling like a great big turd had stopped by for a chat. He said nothing

though and with the rising sun came the sparkling red orb for Raúl and me to hop onto the teleport bus back to the ship.

As soon as we touched it, we dissolved and were summarily teleported back to the Absinthe and the furtherance of the mission.



# CHAPTER 27

## LEVEL UP

Appearing back in the ship, not dissimilar to a Star Trek portal, we moved off the travel area and made for the rec room. We hadn't seen the others since parting a few days previously and we wanted to get the news of their respective experiences and give our own. I was still contemplating how I would give them all the relevant additional information I had from Shavestri about the mission and the new objectives we had to undertake. I was also reeling from the fact that I had bedded an Orc.

"Raúl, why didn't you tell me?" I stated accusatorially.

"Don't blame me, man. I thought you knew what you were doing. Besides, you better keep that promise. I really wouldn't want to get on Lord Groggar's bad side. It would mean ALL the Orcs would hate your guts too. But hey, she's not bad. She always ignored my advances before. I've been nailing her cousin. Now she is one kinky little... well, let's just say she's very fine indeed."

The twinkling in his eye as he thought of the Orc woman he was bedding left me in no doubt that I didn't want to know more.

Along the way, in the passages, a young man whom I had seen only occasionally in the rec room approached us. He was anything but soldierly, with a narrow wiry frame. Bespectacled and every bit the proverbial nerd, he tentatively caught my attention and asked me to go with him. I frowned and asked him who he was.

"Listen, young man, I am on my way to be debriefed by my C.O. so whatever you want from me, it had better be good. Who are you and what do you want?" *It was ironic that I called him a young man, as I looked no*

*older than twenty-five and assuming his age was younger than I, was perhaps overstepping the mark.*

“P.p.p...par..Pardon me Colonel” he stammered. I was a.. a.. aaahsked to fetch you to come to the upgrade node. I am A..ahh..Alex SsssSturgeon, SsssSenior programmer a...a...aand i..ii..iiinterface manager.” His stuttering speech went from slow stammers to ultra speedy completion of each statement. I was also suddenly accosted with Grant's voice in my head.

“Go with Alex. You need to be upgraded.” I felt his presence fade after his comment, so I focussed on Alex.

“How do you do, Alex? I guess you know who I am, very well, then lead the way.” I turned to Raúl and indicated I would join the team when I was finished with the programmer. I knew I was acting like a typical officer and a total dick. I was still trying to wrap my head around the idea that I had bedded an Orc. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if I could actually remember the encounter.

Alex, not much of a talker, and understandably so with that stutter, lead me through a complex series of passageways, and into what could only be described as a Computer command centre. It had computer consoles and loads of technicians doing tech things with all the complex banks of servers and computers blinking like Christmas trees. I realized I was getting an inside view of the computer behind all the simulations. He lead me past the blinking and humming arrays into a whitewashed room. It had a typical layout as a modern dentist or plastic surgeon's room, with long robotic arms arrayed around a translucent platform. The platform was the same as what I had in the first room I had been abducted in and had done all the subsequent Sims in, although it had a great deal more instruments. It was a little unnerving. I was remembering the pain I had felt on my first serious body upgrade. I tried to make small talk. Brave soldier that I was, going under the knife is not pleasant, and I detested Dentists.

“I am rather hungry. Could you not have waited until after my meal?” I grumbled. All the magical healing a few hours before must have consumed a lot of my bodily reserves to bring me back from death's door. I knew that I

was about to undergo a similar type of transformation, but hopefully not as drastic as the first time when I had reached level 5.

Alex prepared me for the insertion, and I hoped I had gained enough experience to take me past level 25 to warrant all this attention. It would be a shame to prepare me for upgrading when none was really needed.

The insertion as it turned out was relatively painless. I was used to it by now and Alex seemed to know what he was doing, so I left him to it. The rest was done automatically, with the most uncomfortable part being the tube insertions, but before it could begin it prompted me to remove my attire. With a thought, I became naked and lay back on the platform reflecting on everything that had happened. If I was honest with myself, I had not had enough training in dark magic as I would have liked. The new spells I had acquired would definitely help me in my mission, but would they be enough? It was a nagging feeling that things were not right and I felt like a turkey being fed prime corn a month before Thanksgiving. “Eat it all, here have more, it’s really good for you.” that seductive voice would purr. And like a fool I was gobbling it all and accepting seconds.

Once the machinery had done its thing, and I was all plugged in and synced, Alex told me to relax and close my eyes and respond to the prompts. I did as he asked.

At once from the darkened recess of my closed lids, the glowing pillar of leveling appeared before me. I was now for all intents and purposes in the level-up room. The glowing handhold beckoning my mental handshake. I took a deep breath and reached out my hand to grasp the knob.

A tone reverberated throughout the room. Ding, Ding, Ding!

You have leveled up!
You have leveled up!
You have leveled up!

...this continued and at the end of the notifications, I saw I was now at level 37 overall. A considerable step further along in my leveling than I had thought.

You have reached level 37 - Your diligence, your search for truth and your steadfast approach to challenges has improved all your skills across the board. Each skill will increase between 10 to 15 points depending on their use. In addition, you have acquired new skills.

### Oratory

Your silken tongue has won over the King of the Orcs. His people love and respect you, naming you the respected title of Tongue Taker and according to you some of their deepest secret dark magic. Your Oratory ability has increased to level 22

### Botany

Understanding plants, their life cycles, and their germination periods from various planets enables you to develop green fingers. Plants are integral to almost every world and understanding their properties, and the ecology and goes a long way to increase your survivability while also increasing your Alchemy skill.

### Weapon Specialization

Your primary weapon, the Katana has increased in skill to level 44.

Your secondary weapon, the long staff has increased in skill to level 40.

Your tertiary weapon, Knife has increased in skill to level 22.

You now have a fourth weapon slot. Use it wisely.

--

Death Defier
Having embraced a real death and suffering both a heart stoppage and brain damage, yet you have prevailed to the other side. To return to your body and continue your vigil has added to your resilience and perseverance. Bonus to constitution.

The list went on and on, and I skimmed through it. In all cases, the points were distributed for me to align with my abilities and the skills I had been using over the last ten days of intensive training. I suspected that the majority of the upgrading had come from the very intensive two days I had had with the Orcs. Besides, I wasn't here in this fancy machine to worry about basic skills. I was here to increase my core attributes. The prompt continued:

You have passed level 25. Your core attributes can be upgraded. Your next core attribute upgrade is available at level 40. You may distribute an additional 10 points to enhance your core abilities further. You may also select an additional profession class to supplement your main class. Would you like to do that now?
Y/N?

I wondered why it was offering me an additional profession since I was already a Prodigy and therefore had all the classes open to me. The more I could boost myself, the better so I selected a resounding "YES"

The list of my core attributes appeared before me.

<b>Col. Petros Arkansas (Callsign: Armpit)</b>	
Class: PRODIGY	Species: HUMAN
Hit Points (HP): 1700 (Additional 400 hit points will boost your system when HP reaches 0. Due to resilience from certain death)	

Mana Points (MP):1900	
<b>Attributes:</b>	
Strength:	17
Agility:	17
Intelligence:	19
Wisdom:	19
Stamina:	17
Luck:	15
Constitution:	17 (Bonus +4 at 0)

You have 10 points to distribute.
-----------------------------------

I considered the list and remembered the pains associated with developing each skill. Be that as it may, I had to add to my strength and stamina, and increase my wisdom and intelligence to increase my magical abilities.

I added 2 points to Intelligence and Wisdom, bringing them up to 21 each. I did the same for the other three main skills, adding 2 points to Strength, Agility and Stamina making them 19. Leaving luck at 15 and Constitution at 17. The added boost from my near death experience was a good insurance policy, and I was grateful for that. It meant I could literally die and be revived by the little nanobots running around in my body. The prompt was asking if the changes should be accepted as final. I selected Y and waited for the pain.

I didn't have to wait long. With all the selections going through at once, it was as if I was being drawn and quartered. Each limb, each nerve ending and every fiber of my being was suddenly and irrevocably changed to something harder, stronger, more resilient and essentially more rewarding. I

screamed like a banshee and when it was all over I was in a world of drowsy relief. I felt my thoughts were more enhanced somehow and despite my bodies obvious pains; I was able to distance myself from them while I approached the next set of prompts.

Congratulations. You have evolved as a Prodigy
Once past the level 25 upgrade, you are well on your way to your next attribute upgrade. Due to the level 25 upgrade, you may choose a refinement class of Prodigy, however, your current leveling will not have any influence on this new class specialization. That begins only from the time of choice.
Selections available are:
<b>Prodigy Prowler</b>
A Prodigy Prowler is only available to Prodigy with Agility level 19 and above. Expanding on the Ranger abilities, a Prowler has enhanced vision, improved reactions and extreme hand-eye coordination.
<b>Prodigy Battler</b>
A Prodigy Battler is only available with Strength level 19 and above. Expanding on the Warrior abilities, a Battler has enhanced superhuman strength and endurance and a higher level martial lore.
<b>Prodigy Magus</b>
A Prodigy Magus is only available with Intelligence level 19 and above. Expanding on the Mage abilities, a Magus has enhanced Spell lore, Quicker and more powerful incantations and the ability to go beyond Tier 2 Magic.
<b>Prodigy Doctor</b>
A Prodigy Doctor is only available with Wisdom and Intelligence Level 19 and above. The Doctor is a learned disciple of the body and its ailments and can additionally self heal
<b>Prodigy Shadow</b>

The Prodigy Shadow is only available with Intelligence and Agility above 19. Expanding on the Assassin abilities, a Shadow has access to Tier 3 magic and excels at infiltration, exfiltration and assassination. Additional skills include a deeper understanding of a multitude of alien morphology and anatomy to aid in their clandestine destruction and circumvention.

### **Prodigy Overwatch**

A Prodigy Overwatch is only available to those with Intelligence and Wisdom over 20. It is a title that brings with it great responsibility. There has been one Prodigy Overwatch to date. As a leader, the Prodigy Overwatch is given unique perspectives for establishing command and control. The enhanced thought processes need to be nurtured and developed once the abilities are acquired. The Overwatch provides unique psychic abilities such as telepathy and telekinesis that will activate in time. Psychic Magic is a Tier 3 magical ability. Besides Psychic abilities, an Overwatch has access to develop other Tier 3 magic as well as a Tier 4 magic, provided the adequate number of ways have opened.

I knew from my previous talks with Horatio and more recently with Shaman Bab that I only had two “ways” opened, so the Overwatch Prodigy would be useless until I opened more ways, but even so, these abilities seemed useful if I was being groomed as a commander. Even as a regular ground-pounder the ability to extend my thoughts to others in the team would be a great boon. I wondered what other things I could do with Psychic magic and also what avenues Tier 4 magic would lead too. I must admit the power curve on offer seemed too good to refuse. Although the Prodigy Shadow thread looked interesting too. It would definitely give me immediate benefits for the upcoming mission. Did I want to forgo the immediate short-term benefits of a Shadow to instead become an Overwatch? It was a tough call and the Princess’s life may depend on my sneaking assassin skills. I sighed inwardly, there was one more selection, the name wasn’t promising, but I had to see them all before I made a choice.



## Prodigy Pioneer

A Prodigy Pioneer is only available to those with ALL core statistics over 17 and a luck modifier above 10. A Prodigy Pioneer is an undeveloped blank slate. Due to the extremely high level of ALL attributes, this tree is open to all possibilities. The user has already demonstrated capabilities within the top 1% of 1% within a bell curve and can self determine their own development. No longer will a Pioneer need a Leveling machine to develop skills as the nanobot technology inserted will create an AI core to handle such details. The upgrade however is extensive and painful and due to the experimental nature of the AI core, the implementation can lead to hallucinations, headaches, and considerable pain during the period of adjustment. This can be anything from 1 month to 6 months. There are no Prodigy Pioneers to date. Are you willing to be a Pioneer?

### Prodigy Pioneer

After reading this description, I realized I had to make the choice best suited for me and who I was, not for a single mission and its singular outcome.

The prompt read:

You have selected to be a Prodigy Pioneer. Is this your final decision?

Y/N?

I chose yes and felt myself becoming insubstantial. Then as my consciousness began to fade I slowly began to feel again. It started at my extremities and extended along them until my core felt solid again. As if I were being reconstructed from the molecular level. It wasn't painful thankfully, but it definitely felt strange and disconcerting. Saying I was becoming accustomed to the various sensations wasn't true, but I was beginning to expect the unexpected. After the sensations washed over me, then, through me, I moved on. With a quick glance at my updated Attributes.

Col. Petros Arkansas (Callsign: Armpit)	
Class: PRODIGY <b>PIONEER</b>	Species: HUMAN
Grand Level: <b>37</b>	
Hit Points (HP): 1700 (Additional 400 hit points will boost your system when HP reaches 0. Due to resilience from certain death)	
Mana Points (MP): <b>2100</b>	
<b>Attributes:</b>	
Strength:	<b>19</b>
Agility:	<b>19</b>
Intelligence:	<b>21</b>
Wisdom:	<b>21</b>
Stamina:	<b>19</b>
Luck:	15
Constitution:	17 ( <b>Bonus +4 at 0</b> )

Now I wanted to see how my magical skills had progressed.

You have magical skill points to distribute. Would you like to add them now?
Y/N?

I chose yes, and the view changed to my Magical skill tree.

A voice crooned out as the prompts read:

You have reached the Apprentice level in several Magic schools  
Congratulations!

You have leveled up nine levels, thus accruing 18 skill points to distribute across your magical levels plus an additional bonus of 15 magical skill points for reaching Apprentice level in one of the Secondary Tier magic.

\*Note:

Tier 2 magic require 2 points per level

Tier 3 magic require 3 points per level

Tier 4 magic require 4 points per level

Points to distribute: **18 (+Bonus 15 points) Total 33**

#### **Tier 1 Magical ability**

Fire	35
Nature	28
Air	15
Aqua	14
Metal	16

#### **Tier 2 Magical ability**

Light (External)	25
Light (Internal)	32
Dark (External)	38
Dark (Internal)	21

Tier 3 magical ability
Psychic magic - <b>1</b>

Tier 4 Magical ability
Blood magic - <b>0</b> (current skill still to be determined, availability after the upgrade completes)

Before I logged out, I distributed points into Dark internal and Light external. My idea being to even out those skills which were lagging. I also added two points to Air and Aqua. My recent near-death experience had left me in no doubt about how much I lacked in Aqua magic, and I didn't want Air lagging behind either.

I also added two to Psychic Magic, although I did not understand what that was, and I definitely had no spells in that field. The Tier 4 magic called Blood magic meant that I had opened another way, and thinking back, I guessed it must have been when I died. The term Blood magic meant nothing to me and there were no highlights or hints for me to read more about it. I also had to wait for the six months as the upgrade completed before I could access that skill so it wasn't something I would worry about at this stage.

I looked and highlighted the changes on the list again:

Tier 1 Magical ability	
Fire	35
Nature	28
Air	<b>17</b>

Aqua	16
Metal	16

#### Tier 2 Magical ability

Tier 2 Magical ability	
Light (External)	27
Light (Internal)	32
Dark (External)	38
Dark (Internal)	23

Tier 3 Magical ability
Psychic magic - 2

Tier 4 Magical ability
Blood magic - 0 (current skill still to be determined, availability after the upgrade completes)

Your abilities have been adjusted.
Logout Y/N?

Finally happy with what I saw, I chose yes and darkness shrouded my vision. Only to appear in the computer command lab of the alien ship.

# CHAPTER 28

## INSIGHT

When I extracted myself from the machine, Alex moved back into the room and assisted me to get my bearings. It was always like this when detaching from these machines; The worst part was when the nutrient needle was extracted from its direct access to my gut. I had asked Grant why they didn't use a tube down the throat, and he had said that sometimes they needed to put material in direct contact with the stomach lining and gut immediately and didn't have time to wait for the throat to swallow. Whatever the reasons, after the upgrades I was feeling woozy. I decided to question Alex about his role and what he did.

We moved into what can only be described as a refreshment room, where the techs took a break and some R&R between maintaining their servers. Cozy and functional. I grabbed some snacks immediately and through a mouthful of donut; I mumbled some per functory questions at my host.

"Hey Alex, how did you get involved in all this?" Alex looked up and then looked around nervously. As if he wasn't sure how to respond without supervision.

"I do the programming of the landscapes and 3D design control for the Sims." he responded. "I also do a lot of the quality control and design of the upgrade system." He didn't stutter at all and I wondered why? Getting back on track, I asked, "So you determine how we are upgraded?"

"No, no, I determined how to represent it to you. The upgrades and abilities are the Absinthes idea. It wasn't always like this, but they have studied us and believe we need a positive feedback system in place that rewards our bodies with proactive engagement. The mobs and challenges are not my area though; I just define and identify which traits are used and

attribute a number or value to them. I studied Astrophysics, but moved into programming and virtual reality. I was a MMORPG programmer for the “Ancient Books” game before I was abducted. The Absinthe wanted something like that system implemented on theirs to adequately convey rewards for effort. Their nanobot technology could make super soldiers out of all of us, but a super soldier who knows how to actually ‘BE’ a super soldier would get more mileage out of the upgrades than someone who doesn’t have the experience. This is why older experienced soldiers are chosen. The Absinthe want the gifts of enhancement to actually be used by responsible people. They provide the Sims so you lose all inhibitions while training. Pushing yourself beyond your limits, while you know you are safe from real death.”

This was interesting, and it seemed Alex had a lot more insight into the motives behind the whole Abduction program. I needed to keep him in a chatty mood.

“What is this whole upgrade gamer thing though? Classes, abilities and so on. Why do they even bother? Surely if they just give us the upgrades and enhance us as time goes on according to our abilities, it would be better?” I inquired.

“Not at all Sir, by listing and naming the respective skills, it gives you Spec Op guys something to focus on. A target to challenge you. You guys have spent your entire lives competing to be the best of the best. By naming each trait, each skill, each ability, we narrow down your focus to allow you the opportunity to enhance it specifically. If you didn’t know your climbing skills were lacking for example, but you had loads of agility (which really amounts to potential), then when you attempted to climb, you might be nimble enough to scamper up most obstacles but would lack the finer skills of the art. With the skill building up each time, you become better and better at it, the potential becomes real. Consider that a cyclist is superb at cycling. Good stamina, strength, and general all round cardiovascular capability. Yet if he was forced to run a long distance race, despite his condition, he would lag behind a long distance athlete simply because he doesn’t have the skill set and knowledge of how to pace his body in running. Similarly, the long-distance runner would find the same difficulties

in cycling. Hence, we list as many abilities as we can and attribute scores. When one of you guys from ASS,” he chuckled at this but I was not amused.

“Ahem...” he mumbled, “... sorry, you know the acronym stands for Abductee Special Service?”

I nodded. “If I have any say in the matter, they will change it. Go on with your explanation.”

He paused to look at me and seeing I was not lingering on that topic, continued, “Well if you Spec Op types know you are lacking in a certain ability, you tend to correct that and force yourself to be better. The average person out there doesn’t have that kind of willpower, nor the discipline. So I think it makes sense that we list all the skills and abilities.”

I umm’d, then aaah’d , rubbing the stubble on my chin. “Can I suggest something?”

“I don’t think I could stop you if I wanted to.” Alex said grinning. He knew I had something I wanted to say. In fact, it was the driving reason for this conversation and he seemed to know it. A smart fellow, this Alex, harmless-seeming, but definitely smart.

“Can we change the system? Can we instead group traits, skills, and abilities into specific titles. What I mean by this is, for example, Archery. If I had a level one in archery, it would mean I could string a bow, understood which way to point the arrow and how to hold it, notch it, aim and fire. Then level two could be that I could hit a target 80% of the time with a rough grouping, then level three would be something like 80% accuracy within a distance of 50 paces and so on? The skills would be combined into the whole title, instead of worrying about finger nimbleness and acuity of the eyes and shoulder strength, etc. Those abilities would just naturally fall under the general skill called Archery. I’m not saying take those away, perhaps use those skills in the programming side to work on whether someone has Level one archery, but don’t bother with giving us the option to upgrade each detailed unit of the whole.”



“Hold on there, Colonel, what you are saying is already in place. We don’t list every single little detail that makes up specific traits. We don’t do that at all. It is much more general than that, even though we narrow down the skills required, it just makes little sense to focus on each little detail, or you would achieve no leveling at all.”

Alex looked at me. “Do you have all those itemized traits listed?”

“I do,” I stated, but now I was feeling quizzical. It is a little overwhelming when I upgraded only to find lists upon lists of skills, sub-skills, and even more sub-skills. Could it be because of my increased level of intelligence I could look into the deeper layers of any given skill? I asked him as much and when he learned I was a Prodigy class, Alex explained.

“As a Prodigy Sir, you have the option to look much deeper into the skills set menus. I am not familiar with that, as that would be something the Absinthe control. If they have boosted your intelligence to such a high level, then it makes sense that you get access to the finer points of manipulation that you can do to improve your skills beyond the norm. It’s the first time I have upgraded a Prodigy class but what you describe fits the profiling. What level are you now?”

I told him and he whistled

“You are coming along quickly. How long have you been here?” he asked incredulously. “It’s less than a month, surely? Usually, new recruits take at least six months to get from level 1 to beyond level 25. You must really be grinding your skills. I guess knowing all the details does make it easier to target where you lack in skills and this is exactly what we are talking about. It helps you advance quicker.”

“Honestly Alex, I have hardly used the interface. I close the battle log most of the time. I find it is only useful in controlling my stamina and watching my health. I am curious though, how does it all work? And why can’t I just get the skills as I acquire them, why do I have to wait for this machine to...” I created inverted commas in the air “... enable them.”

“I am not entirely sure, but from what I understand is that there is now a quantum chip inside each of you, recording and collecting data and sometimes providing data. It enhances your own brains processing power by syncing all the upgrades with your abilities. When you first get upgraded, they start from the ground up. I would hazard a guess that you are no longer even really human. If you are, very little of you is still human biologically. They keep your basic form and function of course . Consider this. They inserted nanobots within your bloodstream to destroy foreign bodies, then line your muscles, capillaries, nerves, bones and every other tissue element with what they call “enhancement elements” These elements effectively replace what you had before. The tissue, sinews, bones are all being reinforced with added elements and catalysts. Allowing for faster reflexes, better adaptability, and special nerve conduits enhanced within your very brain to channel magic. It’s like they took out your flesh and replaced it with something newer, more durable and replaceable. Any deleterious elements within your very DNA have been adjusted and enhanced. Your mitochondria are the factories that keep cells working and even those have been enhanced at the molecular level. There is no part of you that is weak, sick or likely to fail under duress.”

Alex took a breath, a sip of his beverage then continued. “Even aging will be negligible. The cell structures are retained, but the internal proteins, enzymes, RNA, DNA, mitochondria and every other intracellular and intercellular material enhanced with catalysts and reinforcement compounds to help you heal and regenerate while the nanobots reprogram your DNA on how to keep this new form and how to extract the fuel needed to do that. This process I just put you through was the last flushing out of your previous old human body parts and included a booster shot of new nanobots into your body. These will combine at various places and perform different functions at different times. They contain information and are literally self-aware. They have only one objective. To enhance you and thus keep themselves alive. Everything about you has been changed.”

I looked at Alex askance. It was both a dream come true and a nightmare. “You mean they have placed my spirit in a new vessel, I’m a cyborg?”

“I am not sure if there is such a thing as a spirit, but in essence, that's what they have done. Supplanted your entire body, replicating it in every way with newer and better biological material specifically designed for the rigors of a soldier's life and challenges. A magical soldier no less.”

“But I almost died on Illuminous, and despite my strength and enhancements I was not able to stop what felt like certain death.” I argued, now only starting to realize how deeply I had been changed. I didn't feel different. I still felt like me. A younger me to be sure, but in essence I was still me.

“Of course death is always a possibility, even when undergoing these surgeries. There are lots of dangers. Many times people's hearts or their breathing stopped during the process. Sometimes they react to the nanobots themselves in their blood and they hemorrhage all over the place or go into anaphylactic shock. Those people are considered incompatible with the program and are returned to earth where they came from.”

“Do they heal them or are they just left to die?” I asked, reliving my own sense of injustice at being abducted. I was supposed to be retired and sure, I was unattached family-wise, but I still had plans for my retirement and I wanted a chance at a family. Being forced into this revival thing just didn't fit in with my plans. I sighed, my plans didn't fit in with the Absinthes plans either.

“I have no idea Colonel. I don't question too much.” was Alex's shifty response. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

“Why haven't you or the other techs gotten upgrades?” I asked, shifting the topic. It was a dead-end worrying about those who had come before.

“We do, we all have them. We just don't get the Sim time you guys get and with all of you trying to get better and better, we are last in the queue. We all neglect them terribly. If they do not trigger the enhancements, then they will not work. Our most useful enhancements come from the intelligence upgrades and age enhancement anyway, so it's a perfect

example of why not everyone is suitable for these upgrades. We can become super athletes, but instead, we choose the intellectual pathway.”

“How is it you aren’t stuttering anymore, Alex? You struggled with your vowels when you found me, but the whole time we have been speaking here you haven’t stuttered even once.”

Alex smiled coyly. “Can you hear that humming sound? The vibration of the server banks?” I listened and heard a barely discernible hum permeating the area. I nodded, and he continued, “Well stuttering is a self-induced condition in most cases, it compounds on itself when you hear your voice making certain sounds, in my case the vowels and sometimes the “S” sound. That hum is exactly the frequency I need to cancel out the internal audit of my speaking process. As long as I hear that hum, I don’t stutter at all.”

“Is that a fact? Is this another of the Absinthe technological advantages?”

“No, not this time. I had a hearing device that used to play the noise canceling frequency directly into my ear before they abducted me; it did the same thing, although not as effectively. Since I arrived in this area of the ship I have felt at home. It’s seldom that I go wandering around for long. I am always drawn to look after the servers. It’s where I belong. Where I am needed. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get back to work. I believe you would meet your team?”

I realized that our talk time had ended and I wouldn’t get much more from him, but I wanted to know more and Alex’s perspective was certainly different so I left an open invitation for him to join me in the rec room anytime for a couple of drinks. He obviously didn’t get out much and a new friend in the tech department wouldn’t be a bad thing for me. His lackluster response left me wondering if I would see him again. Of one thing I was certain, it was no coincidence that the server humming was exactly the frequency he needed to feel comfortable. It was more and more evident that the Absinthe were manipulators of the highest order.

When I finally made it to the rec' room, only Major Stone was still there. He greeted me cordially and motioned for me to sit at his table. I had a full plate of food and began chowing down immediately. When I finally came up for air, we began the debriefing.

"Raúl tells me you had quite a time of it" he started. I then relayed what had happened, what I had learned, leaving out the bit about the map spell and Horatio's suspicions as well as my... ahem... interlude with Garrina.

I ended my narration with "Yes, our foolish plan nearly got us both killed. Where were you guys while we were with the Orcs?" I enquired, as much to deflect from the memory of the trauma and a genuine curiosity of where they had all gone.

"Oh aye, when we touched the orb, we all went to different places on Illuminous. I spent some time in the Grand Library getting my mage class more attuned to what we will face on the Scalar world. Hugo was with the Dwarves increasing his internal strength and upgrading his equipment, and John was with the Plains Elves improving his agility based attributes. Charlie was with me at first but was whisked off to get more Healer skills."

"Now tell me, Petros, are you ready for this? I have a feeling it will be one of our most difficult missions and a lot is riding on you?"

I could see what he was not saying. He didn't know me that well, and he was a worried man. As the leader, it was all riding on his shoulders. I wanted to tell him everything else I knew about the mission, but I had to hold my tongue. There were too many people around who could easily overhear our conversation and we were probably being monitored by the Absinthe.

"I have done my best to gain the knowledge we will need and honed my skills as best I can within the time frame," I said noncommittally "When do we leave for the mission?"

I used an old SAS hand signal for danger close. He kept his face neutral, but there was a spark of interest as he calmly looked around. His

corresponding signal of “stand by” let me know he was assessing the situation. Our conversation continued.

“All I need to know is if you are worried that ye can’t handle it?”

To which I replied in the same deadpan way. “I believe we can do it, provided we have ALL the information.” My accent on All let him know there was more to be had, but we needed a secure location to discuss it. He nodded in understanding.

“We leave in 16 hours. You probably need to get a good nap to let your new upgrades take hold and to recover from your ordeal. We can have a more thorough briefing on the ground. I think you know what you have to do, and we all pretty much know the drill. So take your fill, lay off the booze, and I will meet you in about 14 hours to gear up and prepare. You okay with that?”

I nodded, mouth full and chewing again. “Fourteen hours Major. See you then.”

He moved off, and I went to get seconds and then thirds.

A long while later, I went to my quarters. I had been issued a room that was small and functional and allowed me a place to just be alone with my thoughts. The bed was roomy and comfortable, and I just lay there thinking about all that had happened. I was thinking of Earth and about my home where I was abducted from. What my friends would think and whether the government would investigate my disappearance. I then thought about Africa, the cradle that birthed humanity when I finally drifted off to sleep.

I awoke as I felt someone slide into bed with me. Startled I whirled around to see Sarah. She put her hand in front of my face to stall my outburst. Then she whispered to me. “I’m just here for comfort, Petros. A lot has happened and I know you guys are leaving soon. I want to be held. Nothing more. I trust you Petros.”

I looked at her face and saw the strain she held at bay. She wasn’t the only woman amongst the crew, but she and I had history and I was taken aback that she had decided to come to my bed.

Sarah continued, “I need someone I can trust, I don’t really know these others, hell, I don’t even know you, but I do know I can trust you. Please just hold me. I need that human contact. I’m not here for sex, I don’t even want a relationship. I just want to be held. You okay with that?”

I nodded. Speechless. She was naked and I was responding as a young body should, and she looked sternly at me as she noticed my response.

“Put that away Petros. I’m serious. I need a humans touch, someone who cares. I know you care about people. Don’t let me down. I want to have faith in humanity.”

Chastened, I nodded and moved over so she could get comfortable. Then willed my protruding limb to subside. As Sarah snuggled up to me, I felt contentment seep through me. I understood what she wanted and it was something I ached for as well. Abducted and far away from everything we held dear, the least we could do was remember that we were human first.

Many hours later I awoke to see Sarah slipping away. She turned and gave me a peck on the cheek. “Thank you Petros. Good luck with your mission.” she whispered.

I was left thinking about Orcs and how quickly life can become complicated.





# CHAPTER 29

## MISSION READY

“One hour to go, are you lads sorted?” said Major Stone.

We gathered in the teleport room and would make for the glowing orb in the center when it was time. There was a crate of equipment that we could take with, each of us taking a fair share of the items. It was mostly food and water, the water in leather gourds and the food was wrapped in leather skins. We could all hunt and scavenge the countryside if needed, but our mission was one of speed. There would be no time for hunting. Charlie had made several gourds of healing potion. He was our designated medic. He had extra, so we were each given some to carry besides the water and food we stored in our various magical devices. My ring seemed a bottomless pit, but someone had told me it had a limit on the number of items I could store in it. It was the weirdest sensation that I was being dropped into a war zone without a single gun, in fact with almost no gear at all.

The cloak had become like a second skin; I wore it at every opportunity and the more I wore it, the more familiar it felt. Sure I looked like a wannabe superhero, but hey I was one. Survival was key, and I wanted to survive. The boots of silence were also a regular feature of whatever I wore. The sensation of wearing boots was a creature comfort that years of military life had instilled upon me. I wore combat fatigues, as did the others. We would adjust the pattern when we ported into the world to better suit the surroundings. I made an extra set for Hugo, who didn't have a lot of magical ability.

While we were dealing with all that Grant made his presence known. “Petros, you will be mission active in a few minutes. I cannot communicate nor monitor you as I have in previous scenarios. You will be on your own. Major Stone is one of the best team leaders, and your mission objectives are

clear. Rescue Alfred Malabourne and then exfiltrate with him. The current population on the Scalar planet will see you as enemies rather than friends, so stay away from them. The retrieval orb will appear within three-day cycles at the designated point. Major Stone will show you where. That gives you one day for reconnaissance, one day for infiltration, and then the final day for extraction. If you are not at the extraction point within the allotted time, we will consider you lost. Most of your recent upgrades should be fully functional now. Best of luck, Colonel. Come back safe.”

He sounded sincere. He even seemed fond of me. The information wasn't new; we had just covered the whole plan with Major Stone. It was the same plan we had been training for all along. I thanked him with mind speak and kept it brief. The mission was on and I could only focus on the goal at hand. Any other thoughts would have to wait until we returned, if we returned.

# CHAPTER 30

## SCALAR WORLD

As the vertigo of the teleportation subsided, we dispersed out like a fan and took cover in the immediate surroundings. I was at the center point next to Hugo. He was all smiles as if this was the best thing ever to be deployed again. I admit I was nervous; it was the culmination of a lot of people's hopes and there was a lot of pressure on me, but seeing Hugo's huge grin made me feel a little safer. If he was beside me, not only was he a bigger target for an enemy, he was also a mean SOB that any sane person would keep well away from when looking for a fight. I grinned right back.

In training, we had practiced this repeatedly. I had always felt uncomfortable without my familiar weapon of choice. Without a gun, it seemed foolish. But here we were and so it was. Foolish I mean. This was downright foolish. Crack shots all and not a single firing weapon amongst us. I would be doubly glad to get those explosives. I just hoped Shav would come through for us.

After what amounted to thirty minutes of scouting the area and ensuring our arrival had not been witnessed, we gathered together for the first briefing.

"Right lads, take a knee and listen up. Armpit, what's got your knickers in a knot?" said Major Stone.

So I told them. I went into the details of meeting with Shav, and the alternative plan. It didn't go down well.

"What the fuck! We have to change the plan?" exclaimed Charlie

"It sounds fishy" was John's response

Raúl kept his counsel, but I could see his thoughts were furious. Probably considering why he had been excluded from my meeting with Shav.

Hugo merely grunted. It seemed nothing phased the large Norwegian.

It was Stone's reaction I was most concerned about.

"God Damn it! I am in charge here. Why didn't you bring this up sooner? We can't just change the mission! For fuck's sake Armpit, you know this reeks."

The expletives and expressions of disapproval were dished out by all. I stepped back, waiting for them to cool down.

I tried again to explain the reasons, and finally Stone began nodding in agreement. We then progressed to adjusting the plan.

I drew the map I had in my head with waypoints on the sand between us and the various locations we could get explosives. Major Stone was slowly coming around and eventually grunted his unhappy approval. Who says the Scottish are stubborn?

"So essentially the plan has changed little, the only extra is you have to collect the explosives and then after getting Mala out, traverse the expanse of the cave complex to find this Princess?" Stone asked at last after I had given more thorough detailing of what Shav and AB had discussed with me.

I wiped the map away in the sand after everyone had absorbed the new route and nodded in agreement and said, "In a nutshell that's about it. I am not happy with this diversion that the Scalar rebels have planned, as it will heighten all those guarding the complex, but if the new Invisibility and Dampen Aura spells are as effective here, as they were on Illuminous, then there won't be any chance of discovery."

Stone interjected, "Aye, but IF is the one word we never use. It's got "chance" attached to it and things have a way of going wrong. You know

the old adage by the Prussian military commander Helmuth van Moltke? “No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main force”.” We all nodded sagely at this quote. I had heard many variations of it over the years.

He continued, “I can see they set you on this course Armpit, and we can’t sit here chatting at a tea party. Let’s move out and scout the explosives drop-off points. It will be nice to have something that goes bang again.” A wicked grin had broken through the tangle of his facial hair. “You take point since you seem to know where we are going. I warn ye Armpit, if this goes tits up, I’m holding ye accountable.”

With that the final word, we set out over the hills and valleys into bear country.

# CHAPTER 31

## DISRUPTION

We made our encampment under a small overhang, protected on three sides from weather and sight. We made no fires and prepared no food besides eating from the few provisions we carried. Hugo was out on the ledge on watch. He had a nice birds eye view of the area we expected to find the explosives delivered. There had been nothing there when we checked earlier and it had me worried. Raúl and Charlie had gone into the next valley over to scout the second location for the second drop point. I was preparing to go out to check the third location when Hugo made two taps with his foot to warn us he had seen someone, well, two people, corresponding with the taps.

We all froze, some mid-mouthful as we waited. The seconds dripped by, like liquid treacle. Slow and sinuous, stretching into minutes. John crawled up beside Hugo, and then after a brief view, slithered back. Using a whisper and hand signals he indicated two individuals running through the area. One carried a pack and a spear; the other was armed with a sling and a sword. Both were Scalar males. We all relaxed at this news, me especially. The explosives were about to be dropped off.

Major Stone indicated that John should follow the two Scalar without being seen to ensure they left the area and then proceeded to leopard crawl himself besides Hugo. “You go scout around, make sure no one else has eyes on this package and make doubly sure. I don’t want this to be a trap we can’t get out of,” he ordered Hugo, who happily got up from his place of concealment and moved out.

Stone then indicated to me I should collect the package once John and Hugo had given the all clear. I moved up beside him and we watched as the other two moved out on their respective missions. I was itching to move. Everything about soldiering is action if you watch the movies, but they

always forget to portray the patient waiting and caution involved. More often than not, if there is action involved, then someone has fucked up along the way. We didn't need any fuck-ups now.

After what seemed like hours, in reality, amounted to minutes, Captain Hugo gave the all clear sign from his position on a nearby crest and I was up and scampering down the hillside to where the bag had been dropped. I didn't bother looking around because that was Hugo's job. I just kept an eye on him for any warning.

The area remained clear, and I got to within a few meters of the package at the bottom of the hill. I could see it was a leather satchel of some sort. They hadn't bothered to put any camouflage on it. It suddenly dawned on me that there was a package, not a few feet from me and it contained explosive of a variety I didn't know. Our focus had been on getting to this point, but could I just pick up some dynamite and hope for the best? What if it was like Nitroglycerine and exploded by just looking at it differently? I grimaced inwardly. This wasn't who I was nor who we trained to be. So many things were being ignored. I edged ever closer. If this was a trap, I was the one who was going to be blown to kingdom come. I understood why Stone had sent me. No use in risking the others on this hare-brained scheme. It was all my fault and thus deserving that I was the first casualty.

Major Stone was definitely making me pay for the added intel. I began to sweat. Edging closer, I crouched down and began leopard crawling. If the explosives were volatile, they would blast upwards and outwards. The smaller my profile to the explosion, the less chance to be vaporized. Ah, who was I kidding? I would be lucky if I survived. But minimizing risk was what I was trained to do, so I edged ever closer. Eventually, I was next to it. I could hear no ticking. It had a strong smell though. A detergent smell. There was nothing leaking from the bag as I examined it. The leather flap was soft and pliable so I gently, ever so carefully slipped my hand under the flap to see if I could feel any tripwires or traps. It was clean. I sighed in relief. No tripwires that I could discern. Then gingerly I opened the satchel. The smell that was pervading the area intensified, but besides that nothing went bang. I edged closer and looked inside.

The black tar substance looked like a huge turd. I mean literally; it looked like an animal had shat inside the bag. It was a dark putty substance that stank. I cautiously opened the second partition within the bag and found two metallic cylinders. They both looked like small cattle prodders with two contact points sticking out of the bottom and a big red button at the top. I guessed these were the detonators. So the gel was explosive and the det's had to be inserted. I looked at them more closely and discovered a small digital interface on each det, directly between the two spikes at the bottom of the device. Once you stuck the device into the gel, there was no way you would know how much time was left on the counters. The display had a place for two digits to display only. That meant a max count of 99. I really hoped that the number counter was longer than an Earth second otherwise there was no way Raúl nor myself would be able to haul ass far enough to get away from the blast radius. At last satisfied that the contents were safe to move, I picked up the bag and realized it contained about five kilograms of the explosive. I packed it all up and headed back to meet with the others without incident.

I was pleased that Raúl and Charlie were back. They had met a different pair of Scalar men who were in the process of making the drop off at waypoint two and were about to continue to the drop off at point three, but were thus intercepted. Major Stone was very unhappy and was busy unloading his ire that Raúl had gone off script. He seemed to be blaming me like the useless influence that everyone was doing their own thing. Raúl just shrugged and handed over the two backpacks. Charlie hung back and kept his mouth shut.

“....you and that fucking Armpit have changed the mission entirely. Which part of “no contact with the local inhabitants” don't you understand?”

I crawled into the overhang cavern with my backpack and was suddenly included in the tirade. I could see Major Stone was not used to things changing or rather, not used to his troops improvising outside the parameters of his orders. Strange for a Spec Op's leader because Special Forces are renowned for going off script and improvising. I began to realize



that Major Stone relied too much on his tight ship rather than spontaneous ingenuity.

At last, he began to relent, and Hugo stepped up and put a calming hand on the Majors shoulder.

“We better see what we have in those backpacks and make new plans Major. What’s done is done. They already knew we were coming here before we arrived. There is nothing we can do about it.” His guttural English accent cut to the point and Major Stone stepped away for a bit to compose himself.

I didn’t want to mess up their team dynamic, and the last thing I wanted was to drive a wedge between command and control. Instead of designating what they should do next, I followed Stone and decided we needed to have a little chat, man to man.

“Major Stone, could I have a minute?” I inquired politely to the seething man.

“Don’t ye come coddle up to me now, Armpit. This is all your fault. We are supposed to get in and get out with Mala, no contact with anyone. This mission is so far off the fucking radar. What will the Absinthe do to us when they find out about this?”

And there it was. I suddenly realized what was troubling Major Stone. It wasn’t that we had done wrong exactly, rather; it was that his position within the Absinthe hierarchy was in jeopardy. Not just his position, but the teams’ position. He was worried that there would be repercussions and that he would, no, “we” would face repercussions. Stone was a good man, the best of men and a leader, he was worried about how this would affect his team.

“Well with your record, there is bound to be some leniency Major. But if we do this right, it could be the start of a serious escalation against the Reapers. The Absinthe reticence be damned. It is what we want after all.

We both know these punitive raids you have been doing are never going to win any war.”

Major Stone sighed. His shoulders sagged, and I realized how on edge he was. I also realized how having me along was messing up his mojo.

“Look, man, don’t be a Rupert. You are better than that. Those REMF Absinthe don’t have a clue what goes on out here.” I said using the SAS vernacular for pen pushers or in layman’s terms the guys making the orders but without having to actually perform those orders. Those Rear-Echelon Mother-fuckers.

“A Rupert?” Now Stone’s glare crinkled with amusement. “Damn you Armpit, you know I’m concerned about after this mess. I’m the furthest thing from a Rupert you will ever meet. I’m Scottish. We don’t have gentry blood. I know it seems I’m being unreasonable, but you are the one acting like a muppet.” A muppet was Royal army slang for a newbie with no common sense, a Rupert, on the other hand, was a British Officer with familial connections, who relied on family reputation to inflict their bad decisions upon their troops.

“You know that our very lives are on the line. That we have humanities best interest at heart. We are dependent on the Absinthe’s good graces.”

“I agree with everything you say Major, except the part about being a muppet, think of this as a way to forge a binding alliance with the Illuminous crowd and the Scalar all in one. The Absinthe are not militants, and as we are on the ground, we have to make the calls. You have to make the call.”

“So if I forbid you to rescue the Princess, you will do it?”

I paused, this was tricky ground. His piercing glare could see right through me.

“Let’s just say I would try less hard to rescue her, but if she got rescued, then we could call it a happy coincidence.”

Stone was already shaking his head. The rueful smile on his face.

“I can’t even get you to change your mind. You are supposed to be under my command, learning from me, and yet you are more bloody stubborn than me. Than me?... a Scot no less. Who is more stubborn than a Scotsman?” He sighed, and I knew I had won him over.

“Let's get on with it then...” he relented.

I felt bad for him,... a little. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but it is what it is. We were definitely escalating the conflict and putting a massive “up yours” sign out for any Reapers to note. However, the situation was beyond my control at this point, and now we were all stuck in our roles. We just had to play this one out and pick up the pieces of the aftermath.

# CHAPTER 32

## TEAMWORK

The final hour before insertion had everyone edgy. We were men of action and the waiting was driving us all crazy. Raúl and I had crept up the canyon through a gorge and could see the building we were to insert in the distance. The area had only one approach road from down in the valley to the south. The area around the complex made a natural cul-de-sac and thus a formidable defensible position. The only way to approach was along the road or down the surrounding treacherous mountains and cliff faces. Each area was clearly exposed and difficult to navigate. There was a milling crowd of the zombie-like Reapers patrolling the wooden fence surrounding a robust concrete building shaped like an “L”. It had a clearing directly in front about the size of a football field before the main gate structure. The entire building was stark, with dark gloomy windows in almost every room. If someone was positioned inside, they would have a birds eye view of the entrance and be able to marshal their troops for a formidable defense.

It was an hour before full dark would descend upon the valley, and the gloom of evening was already asserting itself. At least fifty of the Scalar zombies were moving about haphazardly and making discerning a pattern of patrol movement almost impossible. Our previous plan would never have worked, and we were now waiting for the Scalar rebels to attack and distract the horde so we could insert over the fence during the disturbance. Raúl and I both carried one backpack with explosives as we found it could not fit into our dimensional containers. The space was already full of our various weapons, rations, and health potions. It didn't matter much though; the packs were light on our shoulders compared to packs we had carried in our previous lives, additionally; we didn't have ammo to carry, so if anything, it was a comforting weight rather than a burden. We had separated the large wad of putty-like explosives of all three packs to spread between the two of us.

In my pack, there were several lumps of the putty, akin to grenade size, which I could ignite with well placed electrical bolts. I had also rolled the putty balls in gravel, making sure the gravel stuck to the outside of the improvised grenades, making the explosives that much more lethal as the small gravel rocks acted like shrapnel. Hopefully, we wouldn't have to use them, but it gave us more weapons to use and so made us breathe easier. The problem was that only I could ignite them. Both of us had three larger mounds of putty the size and shape of a loaf of bread with the accompanying detonators, which would bring down the complex.

Our biggest concern was the smell of the explosives. The peculiar smell permeated around the packs like a veritable wall of dust motes flushed from a dusty carpet being beaten on the line. Even when we were invisible, the smell followed us like a stream of dust and if the Reapers knew the smell, they would detect us in no time. According to Shav's detailed instructions included with the packs, we could wet the explosives to dampen the smell without them being compromised. When we had done this, however, the area we set the detonators into had to be kept dry. So preventing the smell leaking out further, I had conjured some cotton rags and bound each one within. A kind of grizzly wrapped present of gravel and explosives that unwrapped itself when an electrical charge pulsed through it in a flaming explosive vortex of shrapnel. The wet rags further enhance the conductivity when I lanced them with an electrical bolt. The few experiments we had performed near our hideout were quite successful and our mood was upbeat.

"I haven't seen Stone so grumpy on an op before," stated Raúl in barely a whisper. "I think the Absinthe really did a number on him before we came here. They must suspect something is up."

"No doubt they are worried about their own skins, but they forget it is us, the humans who have to face these monsters," I replied flippantly and Raúl nodded thoughtfully.

"It's just that there are so few offensive magic users and especially Prodigies," he continued, "we aren't in any position to take on these creatures without incurring bad, bad losses." and I nodded in agreement.

My attention now going to the complex, where lights shone brightly onto the yard and around the wooden slat fence.

“This is it, Raúl. Those Scalar guys better come through for us. A lot is riding on their distraction.”

No sooner had I said this when a terrible whining noise screamed through the valley and a huge burst of flames erupted at the impact point in the front yard of the complex. Mortars! or at least the Scalar equivalent were landing in amongst the guards. The Reapers, some set on flames seemed completely undaunted. They just stood there, as if unsure what to do. The few who had been blown aside simply got up, some with missing limbs and milled about as if searching for something or someone to attack where the shells had exploded. The next salvo landing in roughly the same spot caught even more of them and flung them aside like rag dolls. This time, less of them rose than before, their gruesome flaming visages highlighting the area around them and I noticed more were heading towards the disturbance in the building's front leaving the area we wanted to infiltrate unguarded. This was it.

As one, Raúl and I moved from cover and ran stealthily towards our target and invoked our spells. Invisibility and Aura suppression. As we ran closer, I immediately felt strange.

There were whispers and cries, not from the burning Reapers, but from the very air itself. The words were alien, foreign, but they screamed harshly in my mind, it was as if they had placed me within a thick blanket and the voices were as hands trying to tear away the blanket. This assault on my senses never let up and seemed to get worse and worse the closer I came to the research building. All the while the mortar shells cascaded into the front yard, tearing swaths of the enemy apart and leaving four-armed zombie torches to stand around until they either succumbed to the flaming napalm or the fires went out.

The stench was appalling as a slight breeze shifted the smoke in our direction. I had a rough idea of where Raúl was relative to me, as I had leveled up in the skill of Invisibility I could now make out his vague outline when he was invisible at the same time, although it required a mental

adjustment by both parties to allow this to happen as well as his advanced level.

We kept ourselves roughly five meters apart until we reached the fence towards the back of the “L” shaped building. It was then that the final part of Shav’s plan asserted itself. A vehicle, driven by an engine that groaned and spluttered ominously, streaked out of the gloom along the lone road and directly into the front gate. It crashed with considerable force to cast aside the makeshift barriers and rocks that made up a wall against the entranceway, to roll to a stop against the metal reinforced gate. As the Reapers at the gate rushed to swarm the vehicle it detonated and thankfully, we knew it would happen, because the blast flattened everything around for a good fifty meters.

Dismembered corpses, mortar, stones, and flame screamed past our flattened bodies as we hugged the ground. We lay behind the perimeter fence now, still outside the complex. Huge chunks of stone crashed through the fence near us as if it were wet paper rather than stout timber poles and struts. The jagged splinters from the wood sped off in all directions, impaling and dismembering the horde. It was at this point that the forces inside the complex began to spill out. The glass windows had long since shattered from the explosions and the ghoulish creatures began spilling out from every egress point like angry ants from an anthill. The sudden peace surrounding the complex immediately after the explosion was both because of my ears ringing and the fact that there was nothing much for the Reapers to do besides look around dumbly and twitch awkwardly as they assessed the situation while they smoldered.

It was then that the Scalar Rebel force, which had crept undetected to the complex perimeter along the main road made itself felt.

The Scalar men ran into the road and made an infantry line, they all had blades and shields and the second row behind them had spears and knives, with the rest grouping up and collectively forming a wall of resistance. They began to march towards the hole in the perimeter where the gate had been and began to dispatch the few Reapers in their vicinity. I did a double take when I noticed our very own human, Hugo, the great bear of a man at the front and center of the Scalar troops. I motioned to Raúl, who also stared in amazement.

The tall Norwegian had his rugged blond hair tied back and reflecting in the flames. His tall massive frame dwarfing even the large Scalar males alongside him.

He was not supposed to be there, and I was doubly sure Major Stone was having a fit. If ever there was a mission where things had gone completely off, this was it. I laughed inwardly. perhaps maliciously, not at Stone's unhappiness, but at what this meant for the Absinthe. After this, there would be no more skulking in the shadows.

The entire Reaper swarm was heading towards the front gate where the large crater lay and the phalanx of Scalar Rebel troops stood ready. A subtle sibilant hiss issued from them collectively and I could feel that simpering pervading malevolence in the surrounding air. There was a physic presence, a force pressing and urging and contorting around me. A burrowing worm trying to enter my mind. I shored up my will, trusting that my inner senses would protect me from it and I urged Raúl to follow me. It was our chance to get in undetected while the evil forces within the complex streamed out and attacked the Rebels at their gate.

We turned towards the rear of the building, making our way to the entry point. We turned our backs on the Scalar rebels engaging the enemy. We could hear screaming and cries of pain and courage, and above all, we could hear a Nordic chant as Hugo, the Viking of old went about his work. The clock was ticking.



# CHAPTER 33

## INSERTION

Moving into the building, we met no opposition. It was eery, sinister and extremely nerve-wracking. I missed my night vision goggles, the security of my H&K MP5 submachine gun, my 1911 Browning sidearm and the comforting snug feeling of weighty body and chest armor. I had the advantage of the internal map though, small comfort that it was, and with pinpoint accuracy, I could navigate through the building to the stairwell. Raúl said nothing as I took the lead and directed him to follow my six. We didn't waste time clearing each room in the building as would be standard protocol for a similar insertion on Earth. We didn't need to clear it; we only had to move through to the objectives. Similarly, we were using only our natural abilities to sneak, without the invisibility and aura suppression spells, resting so our mana regeneration could top up our mana reserves. Our aim was to find Alfred Malabourne, and we set ourselves to the task with a vengeance.

Our first obstacle came when we arrived at the stairs. They led down or up. According to the intel we had, Mala was upstairs on the third floor, and the Princess was downstairs. We knew we had to go upstairs first, but the yawning darkness beckoned to me and the barrage of the psychic assault seemed to pull me in that direction. It wasn't until Raúl put his hand on my shoulder. I realized I had unintentionally started towards the stairs leading down to the basement.

“Are you alright Armpit? What are you doing mano? ‘Mala is up this way.’”

“What? Shit!... sorry man, I just want this mission over, you know?” I said unconvincingly, and he eyed me speculatively. I could feel his unease and my own was growing as the pull to go downstairs intensified.

“Don’t you feel it, Raúl? Something wants us to go down there.” I showed the gaping maw of the dark stairwell. As if to stress my comment, some rubble moved down below and we both crouched lower to get out of sight.

“este huele peor que el otro” said Raúl and my mind took a second to translate Spanish into “this one doesn’t smell as good as the other one.” This shift in focus made me do a double-take on my actions and freed me up from the sinister influence, seeming to be guiding my impulses.

I took a slow, steady, deep breath, steeled my mind further, imagining a steel vault, locked and sealed around my mind as I gathered my thoughts into it and allowed the whispering voices to batter harmlessly on the outside, I then nodded to Raúl and we began to move away from the mysterious pull of the stairs leading to the depths and steadfastly moved up the stairs to find Mala, taking care to press against the wall and avoid anything on them that would make any noise. Our boots of silence were working overtime with all the glass littered about. what I can only describe as an apocalyptic debris field, consisting of almost everything that used to be functional in the building was now broken, torn and scattered about haphazardly and barred our way.

It made the creeping around slow and precarious and I could feel my heart rate beating loudly in my ears. It doesn’t matter what people tell you, or how tough they are, or even how experienced they are. When you insert into a building and creep around with danger close, your heart-rate skyrockets and every noise is a potential source of discovery.

As we moved past the opening for the second floor, some movement within warned us, as the crunch of glass echoed above the noises of dying and screaming men and monsters coming from outside through the broken windows. We both activated our spells almost instantly and froze, pressed against the walls to either side of the opening. A large Reaper lumbered into view, shuffling along. One of his arms was missing. Not all the enemy had left the building and as it drew nearer, its ungainly undead shuffles suddenly halted. We both held our breath as it froze, then quickly with a grunt it lunged into the stairwell between us. Neither of us moved. My heart was

beating so loudly I had to consciously calm myself. I had no weapon in hand but knew that it was a thought away.

The creature froze again. It was a meter away and there was a strange sound coming from it. A kind of wheezing sniffing sound. It turned its head first towards Raúl, then towards me. I could see its dead eyes, glazed over, and yet they faced towards me, unblinking and piercing as they scanned the darkness, the sinews of its neck distorting strangely as its head turned. The wafts of dark magic extending beyond the boundaries of the skin a few centimeters before snapping back to the constraints of its pasty putrified flesh. Then it seemed to inhale deeply, chest expanding and air whistling across and into the ruin of its nose and it left me in no doubt that it sensed something was not right.

The voices and whispers increased to a roar around me, but I kept my mind tight. Locked. Inaccessible. My breathing stilled as I forced myself to control it, but my heart threatened to burst out of my chest as the adrenaline surged through me. A large drop of sweat beaded on my forehead and began to trace the contours of my cheek, trickling down the side of my face. First past my eye, then into my stubble, then as if my shear will opposed it, it paused. The trickle beckoned like an unbearable itch. Then suddenly gravity won the contest of wills and it slid further, progressing to my chin. Its trajectory distracting and confirming my palpable fear. If it dripped from me, would the creature detect it? I was just about to conjure my Katana and sever its head in one mighty sweeping arc when suddenly the Reaper turned away and with its ungainly shuffle moved back into the corridor beyond and resumed its stuttering patrol. The drop of sweat fell from my chin, landing noiselessly on my boot. I had faced terrorists, even psychopaths in hostage situations, and they had made less of an impression than this creatures' hideous deathless stare and ominous sniffing.

At least we knew our spells worked, but I never expected to test them out so thoroughly so soon. It had been within a meter of me and I had smelled the corruption of its putrid flesh. The unnatural presence of its infection seemed to swirl within it and around it. Dark swirls of the mana that controlled its movements seemed to project from it, just slightly ahead of its physical presence. I got the impression that the magic within it was

like a spirit. That the dark mana spirit shape moved first, then the body, left devoid of this energy tried to catch up somehow with the dark spirit that powered it. A kind of dark possession tethered to its flesh and in total control of the dead corpse. Whether anything of the original person remained was impossible to know, but if I didn't know before, I certainly knew now that I would have no second thoughts, no hesitation if I had to kill one. They were pure evil.

As it moved away, the voices pounding against my mind receded and we both moved away as silently as we could up the stairs towards the third level, with our spells firmly on and draining our mana away.

As we got to the third-floor stairwell landing, the doors in the stairwell were still intact which allowed us a chance to try observing what was on the other side. A lot of rubble was being moved around out there and we could hear moaning through the doors. According to my map, the doors opened to a long passageway extending all the way to the end of the building down its center with rooms to either side and if we turned right, we would see another passageway doing the same. Our plan was to expose ourselves for just a few seconds to attract any guards and then disappear, hopefully losing them as they ran past us. When we saw at least ten Reapers still active on the other side of the door, I modified the idea slightly.

Raúl carefully opened the door, it made a creaking sound that stretched like a rubber band and it silenced everything on the other side of the door except the noises of the battle going on outside. We had their attention. Suddenly it was like a car had rammed into the door. They smashed open, with one of the doors tearing off its hinges and splintering and clattering against the far side of the stairwell. Both Raúl and I were cowering down, either side of the door, against the wall, our spells like cloaks around us. Our movements completely halted. They had reacted much sooner than both of us suspected or expected. Fortunately, it was the same as when the assault had begun outside. They all had responded. With frightening force and reckless abandon. They crammed into the immediate area and started to press against each other to make room. Some of them by now against the banister. Their soulless eyes scanning in every direction and in particular, those near the banister were leaning over it, looking down. My back to the

wall, they passed within inches of me. Their foul, fetid stench filling the entire place. Death and nightmare combined. As one, they came to a sudden halt. I had placed three of my makeshift grenades at various locations along the banister. The dripping wet rags around the bags of gravel and explosives seemed pitiless when I considered the wall of putrefying flesh before me. In fact, as they streamed in and halted between me and the explosives, I realized I would have to move to get a clear shot at them. I had not expected so many of them, nor to be so terrified. How was I going to access my magic without the calm mind and force of will?

Not only that, but I had to create a barrier that would protect Raúl and me from the blast. Raúl had to get into the passageway, out of the stairwell first before I did anything though, so I watched him slide down the wall, his insubstantial form blurring as he moved ever so slowly and then on hands and knees edge ever closer to the opening. The door that had burst and broken apart was still now bouncing down the stairwell from the initial impact. It acted as the distraction we needed.

When suddenly a latecomer to the party hurtled into the scene. It obviously could not see Raúl as he was on hands and knees and invisible. I could hardly make him out in the doom and gloom, but this latecomer Reaper had been running and suddenly met an invisible force before it in the doorway, about knee height. Still, without sensing Raúl, it tripped over him and fell tumbling into the back of the last Reaper compress gathered in the stairwell. Strike! or more like a Golden Turkey, the skittles tumbled. The ones in front began to fall down the stairs and like a row of dominoes, they fell against each other. As one after another pulled and pushed each other, the situation got worse in the writhing mass fumbling on the floor and I saw one grenade fall from the balustrade to land amongst them, a contorting mass of undead flesh. I could never hit that. Another of the grenades was missing and must have fallen over to the floors below. The last teetered as it wobbled. The balustrade vibrated again with the battering and flailing Reapers. This was too much for it and it fell too, bouncing off flesh and stumbling bone to land on the first step leading down. Right on the edge of falling down the central stairwell and just barely out of my view. It landed and rested against a support beam for the banister. A slight nudge and it too would be on its way down the three floors. One thing I

knew with certainty was that a lightning bolt would never hit it directly. I could barely see it while standing tall, then to aim with my fingers and hope a Reaper didn't get in the way? Not even a one in a million shot.

Out of options and guessing as much as relying on luck I back-stepped around the doorway and fired my strongest lightning bolt spell with at least a 25% drain on my mana bar, right over the writhing unbalanced bodies of Reapers piled around the top of the stairs at the balustrade and along the banister which fortunately for me was made of metal. Metal, besides being a good strong material for structures such as balustrades and banisters, was also good at conductivity. The wet bag of explosives resting against the support strut dutifully sparked and ignited the explosives within. The resulting fireball must have been spectacular to witness. Perhaps less so if witnessed too closely, I was too busy diving to my left to see what happened.

There had been a lot of noise as the Reapers careened into each other, but the noise from that explosion dwarfed them all. The fireball from the explosives swept out into the passageway, casting gravel, body parts, metal, and concrete and singed both Raúl and me where we had taken cover. That explosive stuff was impressive. Note to self, stand well clear when igniting.

We then heard an ominous creaking groan as the building began to tremble and the entire stairwell began to collapse, a cascade and cacophony of falling mortar and concrete that rumbled through the floor and the sound drowned out anything and everything around us. It finished with a final plume of dust that billowed out of the stairwell door. My internal alert bar had lit up for the battle log, but I closed it and ignored it. I then crept forward to see what remained beyond the doors leading to the stairwell and was horrified to see that the broken jagged remains of the stairs would never support a person nor Reaper ever again. That messed up one of our egress points, but fortunately, we had come prepared.

Of the ten Reapers, not a one made it back through the door. I held out my hand to help Raúl to his feet and said, "HHF", my Hit hard and Fast mantra playing in my head.

Chuckling ruefully he brushed the dust from his fatigues. “You are one loco mofo amigo, those explosives are insane.”

Our spells disengaged as we took a knee to assess our next move. Since we had entered the building, less than fifteen minutes had passed and we still had to get Mala out if he was here.

“It looks like we got all the Reapers in one,” I stated hopefully.

Raúl just shrugged. “I didn’t expect any to remain behind from the initial Rebel attack, so there must be something worth keeping up here. Let’s find him.”

We moved out to the right. It was the direction we could hear the strange moans and if it was Mala moaning, then he was in a lot better shape than we had been led to believe.

The fifth door we reached was sealed and locked. The moaning was coming from in there and I could discern that whoever it was they were saying “Help me!” over and over. Standing back, I rapped my knuckled hard on the door. The knock resounding and loud and immediately the groaning went silent. Then a tentative voice called out. “Who’s there?”. *Okay, I don’t know why, but I had the malicious urge to reply “Mikey” Why Mikey? well because ‘my key doesn’t fit’. Okay, it really wasn’t funny and sounded better in my head, which is where I left it.*

I replied, “Can you open the door?” “No, I am locked in here. Who are you? Let me out!”

I turned to Raúl and saw he had a quizzical look on his face.

“What?” I said.

“What language are you speaking? I’ve never heard you speak that language before.”

I frowned at him then reviewed what I had said and realized I had been speaking in the Scalar language. When had I learned that? That was strange. Then I remembered my upgrades and the new ability called Lucid Languages had gotten an upgrade. I had spent little time reviewing it, but it was reasonable to assume it included the Scalar language and this guy was probably not Mala.

With a focus of will I kicked the door and found that my augmented kick had, well, it had a kick to it. The lock crumpled, and the door slammed open and before us on the floor lay a stocky, wounded Scalar. He was in bad shape, both his legs were broken and both arms on his left side were badly damaged too. He had regular cuts or claw marks in his chest that looked like a jealous girlfriend or a passionate lover had been at him, depending on how your mind bent, but it was clear he had put up a fight before being captured. He wasn't going anywhere without a great deal of effort. I began to tend to him.

"We need to pull chocks Armpit. This guy needs to take care of himself," said Raúl. I was pulled from my conversation with Aditya. It turned out Aditya was a Scalar scout who had been captured the day before and was too injured to be a useful Reaper. He seemed fearful of us and wanted to know what we wanted with him. He eventually passed out when I gave him a healing potion. I didn't want to use my precious mana on him unless absolutely necessary and here the healing potions would do the trick. I could sense the magic coursing through his body, healing his hurts and aligning his bones, but it wouldn't heal them completely. His room faced to the mountainside, so we were unable to see how the battle was progressing. His window was shattered as were all the windows we had come across and several shards of glass had been lodged in the poor Scalar fellow adding to his injuries. He wouldn't be able to walk out of here on his own steam, and Raúl was right. We didn't have time to worry about this guy. We left the room and moved onwards down the corridor, checking every room.

The last door at the end of the corridor was also locked and this time Raúl smashed the lock with his hefty boot.

When we rushed in, weapons poised we came across a bizarre site. The room was a makeshift laboratory. It looked very similar if not identical to



the one I had recently been upgraded in back on the Absinthe ship. It had insertion tubes, a bank of humming servers, and a translucent bed platform. The apparatus had been installed here recently as all the tables and chairs here originally were stacked in one corner out the way. The computers had cables leading out the window and up towards the roof. With blinking lights, it was still very much operable and left me wondering what the hell was going on here in this research station. We found no one living or dead though and left the room, both of us deep in our own thoughts. We had one more passage to clear.

Arriving at the stair junction again, I checked the stairwell, but nothing had changed besides perhaps more rubble had shifted. We turned right and began clearing the rooms. Again we found nothing and the brief glimpses of the fighting in the reflecting fires burning outside showed that the Rebel Scalar with Hugo's help were carrying the day. There were considerably fewer Reapers than the fighting Rebel force now, unlike when the battle had started. Their formation still held, and it looked like they had turned the tide.

At last, we reached the final door at the end of this main corridor. This had to be it. Again we did a brute force entry, swarming in to kill anything that moved.

This time, however, we finally found Mala. A burley brown haired and well-built man, naked and splayed out upon another lab table. He was hooked up and had been so for some time. His beard and mustache long and thick obscuring his face but he definitely looked like Mala. There was a cable attached deep into the back of his neck, and the other tubes were protruding from his various orifices. It disturbed me how vulnerable he looked and reminded me of how much like an entomologist's prized insect he was, pinned and mounted in a collection.

"What the fuck?" said Raúl, and I agreed with his sentiments exactly. This place gave me the creeps. There was also one glaring wound that could only be noticed upon closer inspection. The pinkie finger on his left hand had been severed. When Raúl showed the stump to me, we looked at each

other knowing what it meant. This place would have to be destroyed completely if we were to keep him safe.

“We should detach him and get him out. You grab him while I cut the power, ” I said, moving to the large clump of cables leading out the window. The window sill presented the perfect chopping opportunity. As I sliced through the cables with my Katana, I was also checking outside to see how the battle was going. My eyes widened in shock as realization dawned on me. The moment my blade severed the conduits, as one, every Reaper on that battlefield fell.

I turned, wondering W.T.F. and was brought back to my senses when Mala began hacking and coughing. Raúl had pulled out his catheter and the feeding mechanism from his stomach and was now detaching him from the neck brace. He seemed groggy and disorientated.

“What?... where am I? Who are you?” were his first words before his eyes rolled back and he collapsed unconscious. I moved over to help Raúl, and we dragged him to the window. I had got the line out and was tying off one end to a server bank as the anchor. We then rigged up a makeshift harness, and I helped Raúl fast-rope first, after which we lowered Mala’s unconscious form with Raúl as a counterweight on the belay. My thoughts were whirling as I considered the implications. Raúl had not seen what I had seen. He did not know that it was Mala who had been controlling those Reapers. Perhaps not controlling, but maybe empowering them? I didn’t know what to think and Mala had reached the ground. By this time, Hugo and several Scalar Rebels had arrived. I thought about their man we had left in the other wing and after a quick call of “Wait” ran back to find him.

He was still groggy, but with a little help, I was able to drag his arse back to the egress point. I lowered him down and then fast-roped myself down. This all had taken less than ten minutes. In all, we had been mission active for almost half an hour. I still had to get to the Princess and plant the rest of the explosives and didn’t know if that was possible now with the collapse of the stairwell.

*One step at a time*, I admonished myself as I fast-roped down to join the others.

Hugo was all smiles. “Armpit you devil!” he exclaimed. “How did you do it?”

“Do what exactly?” I asked puzzled.

“I saw you in that window” he showed the window above where I had severed the cables. “One sweep of your arm and all the beasts dropped,” he stated, dramatically mimicking the sweep of my arm chopping the cables. Exuberance springing from his battle high.

“Oh, that? no, I just cut the power. The creatures must be linked to power.”

“What? These creatures are electrical? Haha... perhaps maybe you make a joke?”

“No, not at all. But I think it is worse. Mala was attached to a simulation leveling machine. When I cut the power supply, all the Reapers dropped on the spot.” This brought uncomfortable stares from both Captain Hugo and Raúl.

“What are you saying, Armpit?” said Raúl.

“You heard me. Mala was powering those Reaper bastards. You have to watch him. His finger is gone, maybe they were blackmailing him, anyway I have no idea what's going on here, but I have to finish the mission. We still have to blow the complex and recover the Princess. Before I go, tell me one thing though, did Stone allow you to help these guys?”

Hugo grinned, “Stone and I were discovered as we stood overwatch. The Rebels decided to use the same watchpoint as us and it would have been difficult to watch the mission with them so close without exposing ourselves, so Stone just stepped out and surprised them. One of them could speak English and he asked if we could join forces. They knew about us, of

course. I then agreed to help. Since Charlie and John are on rearguard, I was the only logical choice, but now I have to return with Alfred.”

He stooped and picked up the unconscious naked man with seemingly no effort. It was like he hadn’t just been hacking Reapers apart a few minutes before and he made off to meet up with Stone and the others. He called back over his shoulder.

“Hurry Armpit, this mission is going well. We will wait you at the planned waypoint. Good luck!”

The Scalar Rebels had been grateful to get their man back and now that their part of the mission was done, they wanted to get out of there. Hugo moved out too, and Raúl and I were alone again.

“Are you serious, man? Did Mala really control those Reapers? How can he be involved in all this?”

These questions I left unanswered as my own thoughts swirled. We turned back into the building and pressed into a run to the stairwell on the ground floor to see if we could still get access to the basement and caves beyond.

# CHAPTER 34

## OBSTACLES

Bits of rubble were piled up everywhere. The entire stairwell was clogged way out into the passage. There were remnants of an explosion here too, as my illumination spell lit up the flash burn on walls and ceilings. With all the luck going for us upstairs, things had been too good. Now, we had to face possible mission failure.

“One of those bags of goodness you put on the banister must have landed down here against the metal banister and exploded at the same time. No wonder the entire stairwell collapsed,” Raúl observed rhetorically. It was a mess. We both knew it. A one in a million chance and the coin had landed on its edge.

“Of all the luck” I crooned woefully. “Give me a minute. I need to check something.” I opened up my internal minimap and started to search for alternate routes. “There must be another entrance. Otherwise, we will have to dig our way in. There must be survivors down there. And remember we still have found no Reaper Officers.”

This brought a look from Raúl. He was still thinking about Mala.

“Don’t think like that man, it must be a coincidence or else they were just using his magic. There was no way he was controlling those things to attack us.” I stated, trying to ease his worried mind.

“How do you know that? He hadn’t been tortured. You saw it yourself, there wasn’t a scratch on him besides his missing finger and that had mostly healed. He was supposed to be all banged up, tortured and such.”

I shrugged. I didn’t have time for these mind games. “Let’s just focus on getting the Princess out, then we can solve all the other stuff. Mind on

mission!... and... well, I think I have found us a way in.”

“What way in? We blocked this stairwell. I’m not moving all that rubble for the Princess that’s for sure. They can stay buried down there. A veritable sacrifice.”

“Just trust me, Raúl. When have I been wrong?”

“Every time you open your mouth Armpit, that’s why they call you Armpit right? Because you speak out your Armpit. It sounds to me like you are saying ‘here, hold my beer’.” Raúl was talking shit now; we both knew it. The tension was getting to both of us.

“Ah fuck it, like you say ‘HHF’, so where are we going?” he said as I led him down the wing leading to the right and into the second last door. I then began to unpack and reshape one of the explosives.

“No way man, that shit is crazy potent. What are you going to do? Loco puta! I’m not dying on this fucked up planet man. Have you lost your mind?”

“I thought SEAL’s never complain, but boy was I wrong.” I muttered to no one in particular. “Calm down, man! I’m only going to use a little. We have surplus, and outside this broken window against the cliff wall is an array of ducts that lead from down below, up to the cliff top. They are big enough for a Scalar to fit into, never mind a man, we should fit comfortably. If there is no man-hatch, then I will blow a hole. Nothing to worry about, okay?”

“Fucking loco, I really don’t wanna go down there. Fuck... let’s do it.” he then paused.... “Sorry man, I’m a little edgy, you know?”

*I did know.*

That psychic assault was at it again and it was taking its toll as we both struggled to come to terms with the fact that our target was out of reach for now.

After climbing through the window and making our way to the cliff face, we found the ducts, extending vertically from below and all the way to the top of the cliff. The pipes were vibrating slightly from some machinery, and I assumed that must be from the extraction fans at the top. Our luck held, and we found a service entrance door for all the seven vents. *Probably one vent per level. I chose the vent leading down to the lowest level because I reasoned if the creatures we were about to face had someone in charge, they too would consider the vents to escape the catacombs below, then they would probably use the one on the highest level to escape, not the lowest. I definitely didn't want to bump into a Reaper while in the forbidding dark vent pipe thingy.*

The descent progressed without incident, Raúl took the lead in case things got tight, but the vent stayed the same size the whole way down, however, the angle of descent changed to about thirty degrees off vertical after two-thirds down and I assumed the levels within the caves were not directly underneath each other. It would be completely new territory. The blueprint map didn't have any details of the caverns at all below the fourth level, although it showed seven sub-levels total. When the pipe did a horizontal bend, there was an access door at the elbow junction. I was glad of this as I didn't want to have to use explosives to get out of the pipe. Raúl opened and stuck his head out far enough that he could see, then quickly exited from the vent. I followed suit, and we found ourselves in a dank cavern that seemed to glow a subtle blue color from some luminous moss or lichen scattered about on the cave walls.

There was not a sound except the vibration from the vent and dripping water from various crystalline stalactites and the gurgle of running water which led to a pool in the far corner. It seemed to be the lowest point in this cavern system and all moisture gravitated towards it. Of its depth, I had no idea. It was as dark and foreboding as the caverns above. The pipe continued along with the ceiling through the wall and presumably into the adjoining cavern. The air smelled of death, dankness, and musty mushrooms. We closed the manhole but did not bolt it and dropped down to ground level. There was a kind of fire escape ladder that could be extended, but we reasoned it would make too much noise if we used it. Both of us had

activated our spells before we left the confines of the pipe and so we felt relatively safe from discovery. Now we had to scout and find the Princess without alerting whatever was in here. Easy peasy. Yeah right!

The adjoining cavern was equally deserted, but we began to get an idea of the inhabitants of this place. There were skeletal remains of all kinds of beasts. Broken, discarded rotten meat, limbs of Scalars, and haunches of other meat and the corpses of rodent and insectoid type creatures with huge bites out of them. Putrefying and rotten, with large piles of refuse and assorted garbage around it. The smell was powerful and reeked of death, rot and sewage.

This must be the refuse dump I thought to myself as we moved through, silent as ghostly specters witnessing what looked like the arse end of a Troll's lair.

As it turned out, the lowest level consisted of only the two caverns, immediately after exiting the second cavern, the passage turned back on itself at a steep angle and we came across another opening on a higher level, this one illuminated by more of the blue glowing moss. There were machine implements, most of them broken and discarded where they lay. The equipment seemed technical as if used for research and mining. The blue lichen seemed to glow brighter as we neared and lessen in intensity as we left it behind. We found no one alive, nothing of note. It was as quiet as a grave except for the incessant psychic assault on my mind and the constant drip, drip of dropping moisture from the ceilings above.

Finally, on the third level from the bottom, we found signs of habitation. Large rooms, blankets were strewn about and various assortments of clothes. Sleeping pallets; broken and discarded, lay strewn about. Nothing moved, nothing breathed. We were ten minutes into the insertion and hadn't come across anyone. Raúl gave me the sign that he was running below half on mana and as we took a knee, I took over dampening his aura as he came out of invisibility to recharge. We didn't want to take the chance of being caught low on the precious magic fuel when we made contact with whatever lurked in the dark places above.



The fourth level began to show more signs of habitation. We began to move more quickly. It was with a sigh of relief that we were moving into an area that I had mapped out in my head. The first four levels from the top entrance were in greyscale but at least we had an idea of what to expect in terms of infrastructure. According to the map, we were nearing one place where we had to put explosives. I indicated as such to Raúl as we saw the pillar from above extending down from the ceiling to the base of the cavern floor. A crucial support pillar that held the building above securely. The entire pillar was made of fabricated material and the glowing moss completely swamped it.

We found a second support pillar a few rows down.

Here the caverns had been mined. Doors separated them and as we moved further along it seemed as if nothing at all lived here except the ghosts of Christmas past.

Our movements were quick and economical. The psychic assault, however never lessened and seemed to intensify. It was like a countdown. A countdown to the confrontation. A building of climactic tension that needed release and would be dictated by the circumstances of what we found.

Neither of us was looking forward to it, but stoically, doggedly, we persisted on our mission. The princess needed our help, and we trained to rescue princesses, even if it had never happened in my reality until now.

# CHAPTER 35

## THE DEPTHS

The raised fist warned ‘Danger Close’, then changed to ‘Contact Front’ as I watched Raúl’s blurry invisible form move around the final corner on the fourth floor. We were at the last passage on sub-level four before the elevator shaft. Something had spiked Raúl’s warning but I could not see it yet even though I was only about two meters directly behind him and we had the Elevator shaft opening at our front.

I couldn’t see anything and the screaming psychic assault was voicing words I could understand. Not all of them, most were gibberish, but the sighs, moans, and screams from different voices bombarding my awareness were occasionally saying words like “Surrender! Give up now, succumb to us! Join ussss!” The words interspersed with static splurges and sibilant hisses and then to round it off there were long drawn out nails on chalkboard screeches, which all had me very truly on edge.

Raúl wasn’t as sensitive as me and said he could only hear a discomforting background distortion. To add to that I felt a creeping migraine which could only be the result of my recent upgrades or else the bad air down here was low in oxygen. I hardly ever got migraines, but this one was a humdinger. Even the blue glow from the moss seemed too bright to my sensitive eyes and caused them to water spontaneously. It wasn’t the best state to be in, but I had been through worse scrapes so I would persevere and we would achieve the objective.

I finally realized what Raúl was warning me about. The elevator was descending. I could hear the chug... chug... chug... as the gears churned to lower it down the shaft. The creaking cables that supported its weight twanged ominously, signifying a heavy load. It was a very rudimentary setup. Understandable considering we were in an area mined for research. That it had become a zombie hideout was a downer too.

We made for cover in one of the passage alcoves and stilled our racing hearts. Whatever was in there, we did not want it to discover us and give away our one advantage. In skirmishes, battles and wars around the world,

the most precious of advantages was always by far, the one of surprise, so when you had it, you made it count.

Clang! The elevator reached our floor. Click, click, click, the panel door on the elevator slid open. Then pure silence echoed about the place and swept down the corridor. Not even a drop of water deigned to disturb it. Until, after what seemed an impossible pause, the creature stepped forward. A resounding thud of its tread. Then a quick thud, thud, not unlike my heartbeat. Then the silence swept out again. I tentatively adjusted myself so I could look out the alcove and down the corridor to see what had just walked through the door. To my astonishment, another crash resounded through the area, plumes of dust obscuring my view and small pieces of rubble spread out from the door. As it settled, I saw the elevator was full of rubble and someone or something behind it was pushing and shoving the broken shards of concrete out. The first noises had been the rubble toppling out. So not a monster then, just a delivery of rubble. I sighed in relief and moved over so Raúl could also see. Once the rubble chunks were deposited outside the elevator, the two Reapers within, autonomous in their actions adjusted the internal lever and the doors began to close. Clang, clang, clang, the door forced errant rubble away, the screeching door worked itself closed. Then suddenly the lift began to move up.

Without thinking or knowing quite what I was doing I ran forward and calling back as softly as I could, said, “Raúl, lay the explosives, I will be back.” then without hesitation, I jumped up beneath the elevator and caught-a-hold. The elevator lurched but continued up. Inwardly I was hoping that the Reapers would not notice the lurch from within. I need not have worried. The elevator continued up, and I held on, swinging precariously beneath. Holding on wasn’t difficult. I was strong, enhanced, and agile. The difficult part was reconciling why I had just done what I did? It was as if on an instinctual level I had acted. Like my mind had deduced things I had yet to fully acknowledge. My actions completely at odds with my tried and tested training.

The old elevator was more like a window washing elevator found on most skyscrapers and had plenty of protruding ridges below it I could clamp myself to. Which I did with relative ease. The elevator was gaining speed, and it was just passing the next floor, in which I saw nothing guarding the elevator entranceway. I swung off into the area beyond as the elevator

continued to the top floor. I had just rolled to a halt when I heard shuffling coming from far in the dark cave I had just entered.

I was alone in my immediate vicinity, invisible, and had my aura dampened to the max. I figured if I left Raúl behind. It was one less person to worry about and he could do what he was supposed to do, namely lay the explosives. There was only one on this floor I was now on. The other two down below.

Nothing came to investigate any disturbance I may have caused when I leaped and rolled onto the floor, and I was starting to believe that we were still undiscovered and capable of getting ourselves out with the princess.

Where was she? According to the map, it was most likely that she was either on this floor or on the first floor. Both floors had lockable doors installed between caverns and atriums. We had found none of the Scalar prisoners who were also supposed to be here. And still no sign of a Reaper Officer. It was all rather strange and did nothing to calm the frayed nerves.

Deciding to be prudent, I tied off a line to the crossbar and lowered it through the elevator shaft to the floor below. Two support beams either side supported the braced crossbeam at the top of the entrance from the elevator shaft to the corridor beyond. There was a gap to the side where I tied the rope off, letting it dangle down the shaft, trusting to luck that it would not be discovered by the unobservant Reapers, who seemed to do little besides following serf-like behavior unless riled up for a fight. If I needed to escape quickly, it would be better if I was prepared.

The distance down to Raúl was easily ten meters and while I could jump down, it would guarantee a sprain at best, and broken bones at worse, especially landing on the uneven cavern floor of the dark elevator shaft.

Turning I took in my surroundings and noticed the passage made off at a slight curve into the murky gloom. The distance held what seemed to be artificial light, so this floor had electrical power. The first room to the right was just barely noticeable with the angle of the curve. I had inkling if the passage was clear further down unless I went forward, so I did.

As it turned out, there appeared to be no-one and nothing, and I crept on silent-booted feet, hugging the shadows, embracing the drain of mana as my Invisibility and aura dampening spells did their work of obscuring my presence. From the map, I knew there were at least twenty rooms along this corridor and it was the most extensive of the mapped area.

Reaching the first door, I first listened and then when hearing nothing, tried to open it. The large wooden door moved easily and without pause. I entered the room. Inside lights stuttered on, triggered by the door opening. The cavernous room was about ten meters wide and deep. It appeared to be a storeroom. Shelves of equipment, bottles of chemicals, and stacks of containers lined the walls right up to the ceiling.

Towards the back of the room though, two containers caught my eye. One had a red LED light and another a green LED at the corner of their large box shapes. Moving closer, I found it had a see-through top, with crystal ice around its edges. I looked closer. Appalled to see that the entire freezer, because that's what it was, had different items within, stacked and bar coded. I couldn't read the labels, nor see into the containers. All of different sizes, but nothing bigger than hand size.

I had a pretty good guess what was inside those containers. This was a sick and twisted fucked up universe I thought to myself, but the crimes were all the same. Extortion, blackmail, and domination were traits I had sworn my whole life to fight against. I removed my backpack and prepared a nasty surprise for whoever collected an item from these freezers.

By the time I was back in the passage, the elevator was on its way down again with another load; I pressed on down the corridor to the next door. Time was running out, the assault on my mind was ever increasing and my mana was depleting.

It wasn't until the sixth door that I found the door locked. When I opened it with brute force, the Scalar man inside had little chance to cry out. They had strapped him down on a lab table like his pitiful moans and gasps. My superior intellect immediately supplied me with the information it had deduced from what I now saw. He had been sliced and diced, and parts of him were on side tables, neatly stacked and quartered. Each had a tube spewing cold gas into the package to keep its freshness. I retched and vomited on the floor. This man was being butchered piece by piece to supply sustenance to the Reaper population. His living flesh cut off in chunks and cryogenically frozen immediately. He was being kept alive as long as possible to ensure that they could harvest all of him, then they would feed the entire batch at once. I retched again. I had seen some fucked up shit before, but this was way off the charts.

I went up to him then and materialized so he could see me. His flinch and cry of fear was to be expected. He then surprised me by speaking. Soft

words, full of hate and venom. The gurgle of phlegm in the back of his throat a testament to how precariously he clung to life.

“K...k..kill me!” he gurgled in Scalar and then spat, the mucous fluids still clinging to his lips and cheek. “You have what you wanted, now kill me, my children wait for me beyond the veil, I can hear their voices...” he coughed then with a dip into his resolve, screamed,: “Kill meeeee!”.

The wailing continued, and I gritted my teeth. This man had been through enough. His muscles harvested, and I assumed that if he was dead, the flesh that was harvested from him would then be worthless to the horde. I conjured my blade and severed his head. It was not done easily, though it was done quickly. The horror of this place, of the foe we fought, was sinking in. I did not want creatures who could do this on our planet. I also realized that this was the first killing I had done directly in many years.

The explosion wiping out the Zombies upstairs was separate. Something distant. My mind could easily dissociate from owning the horror inflicted on such an enemy in such a way, but here was a decent man by all accounts. An innocent victim, possibly a courageous soldier. He was someone who had been something good, and I had barely paused in ending his life. Instinctively I knew the magic I had, the potions, spells, all of those things didn't matter in the face of this Scalar man's injuries. I wanted to honor him and instead, I had killed him. How do you reconcile something like that?

Realizing I was becoming distracted with an old soldiers' dilemma, I let it go, and focused once again on the moment. HHF and move on I told myself. The machine to which they attached him began to beep ominously, and I started cutting cables. It eventually stopped and I could move out of there. Before I left the room however, I placed the last of my packed explosives around the support column rising out of the centre of the room. I left the det's, poised and ready next to it. I would only have to press the red button and insert it into the foul smelling putty to ensure the above building would collapse after a slow count to a hundred.

Re-spelling invisibility I followed the doors down the corridor. Each with equally disturbing and disgusting contents. Fortunately, no-one else was alive within them.

After twenty minutes, I began to grow mana fatigued. The passage seemed never ending despite what the map said and there was definitely no guard down here. My headache was worse, and my mood worsened. Where was this damn Princess? I thought to myself over and over. In the

background I could hear the elevator making its third descent. Soon things would be cleared upstairs and creatures would filter back into these tunnels. I didn't want to be here when that happened.

It was then that I came across the cells. This area, at the far end of the corridor had much studier doors and inside I could hear whispers, sobs and in some cases, crying.

I could not kick these doors in, no matter how augmented I was. Maybe Hugo could do it, but I wasn't him by any means. At least not yet. So I used a tactic from Earth. I rattled the door madly and gave everyone within a chance to clear back from the door. Then I placed a small pebble of the explosive putty within the keyhole and standing well back, sent an arc of electricity. At the same time I extended my will to create a barrier, encompassing the entire passage. Separating myself from the explosion and hopefully deflecting the noise from passing me down the passage to those above.

A loud crack and the bolt flew off. The door as it buckled from the unnatural forces broke lengthwise. The cries and screams inside were to be expected and once I kicked away the remaining shards, found a room full of fearful Scalar. They could not see me, but were jittery, and I left them immediately to go to the next door. It was only on the final door that I hit gold.

The Princess! She was sitting sedately in a sparse room, her back to the wall. A white sheet covered her modestly, and one end was bunched up upon the stump of where her left hand used to be; It had a dark crust of blood. Her face was pale and drawn. Her hair bedraggled and her slim athletic features seemed wasted. The rest was hidden beneath the sheet. When I appeared before her, she seemed unimpressed.

"What do you want?" she intoned in Elven. What? I could understand Elven now too? This internal computer AI implant tech was giving me a serious advantage. The amount of times I had wanted to know a local dialect or language during my missions on Earth was uncountable. How great it would have been to know Pashtu, Urdu, Dari or any other of the myriad of languages from the various places I had visited. Relying on a local Terp had presented a lot of problems. Now it seemed I had every language at my fingertip, or rather my tongue tip.

“Come Princess Adrianna, your father has sent me. We must get out of here! Come quick!” My urgent plea was not wasted. She reacted immediately, however, it wasn’t the way I expected. She launched herself at me, and with a roundhouse flying kick nearly took my head off. If it wasn’t for my reactions and agility and what seemed like an echo of a warning from deep inside my head, she would have caught me flatfooted. As it was, the kick shaved my brow, and I immediately did a back roll, gaining both distance and space from her. I did not understand why she wanted to hurt me, but she had to stop this now.

“What are you doing? I am here to help you! Your father sent me,” I said, exasperated. I was in the passage and she still in her cell. The other cells I had opened before were still as I left them. Not a single Scalar had come out, and I had freed more than a hundred of them. Why were they still waiting in their cells?

“I don’t have a Father!” she screamed, spittle flying in her fury “he has betrayed our people, he has betrayed me, don’t talk about my father!”

I knew the Princess was headstrong from Horatio, but I did not understand the vitriol between her and her father. It didn’t matter though. I needed her to shut up and to come with me. I hit her with a silence spell and then getting in close I subdued her small and agile form. She didn’t have much fight in her and appeared to have some kind of collar around her neck. I slumped her over my shoulder and ran for the exit point. I called into each room as I passed, “If you want to be free, follow me.”

I didn’t look back and ran for the elevator shaft. She kicked and clawed at me the whole way. I had no time for it. We had to escape and we could sort out all the other stuff later.

Reaching the elevator, I lowered her down the rope first. She was catatonic now, her anger had run its course, and she followed instructions without pause. Raúl was waiting at the bottom and helped her unharness. I was about to go down too when I heard the elevator above begin to descend. Looking back, I saw the stream of Scalar behind me.

Watching me fearfully. I sighed and beckoned them to come, lowering as many as I could before the elevator reached us. The slow clang, clang, clang as it descended was like a drum roll, hastening our movements as it drew nearer and when it reached the floor above it stopped. That was new.

A sudden and severe wave of nausea swept over me. The psychic assault seemed to have quadrupled in severity. Without knowing how I



knew, I just knew that the elevator had just picked up a Reaper Officer, and the drum roll began anew, the elevator starting its descent.

I motioned for them all to go, go, go... but knew in my heart that there wasn't enough time. Even with four arms and amazing strength, this batch of washed out Scalar peasants would not get out in time. Clang, clang clang, the elevator began to slow, dropping inexorably downwards. I had a chance, a small chance, a bare moment to jump before it arrived, but I would leave these poor people to die, to be carved up, to be fodder for these Reapers. That wasn't who I was or what I represented. I just couldn't do it. I signaled urgently to Raúl's upturned face as he looked up the elevator shaft. He was helping an elderly Scalar prisoner down the last few meters of the shaft.

"Exit with the main target now! I will catch up if I can." I used hand signals so as not to betray my presence. Raúl's urgent gestures for me to come down now fell on deaf ears. I signaled "Go!" and stepped back as the main carriage of the descending elevator reached my level. I saw panic and resignation in his eyes and then, still looking up, his eye contact smoldering with fierce pride, he saluted me and I heard his final whisper "HHF". It was the last time I heard or saw Raúl for a very long time.

I turned and said one word in the Scalar language as urgently and loudly as I dared. "RUN!"

The ten odd Scalar that were left, looked at me for a second then as one, they turned and ran back towards their cells, some wailing, some in silent disappointment. I wasn't far behind and soon caught up. I engaged my invisibility spell and made straight for the curving corridor, assisting those stragglers who themselves were caught in two minds. The elevator behind had come to a stop, and I needed to get to cover before all hell broke loose. I could hear the door clicking open and I was just around the corner, away from direct view when I felt the air warp behind me and a dark bolt of magical energy splattered against the rearmost scalar. His body seemed to melt then disintegrate into a sickening cloud of vapor and particles, which unceremoniously cascaded to the floor. His sharp cry and twisted expression gave me a sign of the pain he must have felt as every molecule in his body separated.

I turned into the next doorway, not wanting the same fate to befall me. Whoever had cast that dark magic had skills. It was an empty room, and didn't even have furniture I could hide behind. Why had I chosen this room? I admonished myself. It was too late now. I was committed.

Trapped, confused. The headache screaming and my heart beating like a runaway train. Whoever had fired that shadow blast was extremely powerful, and I had no other choice but to stand and fight. Hopefully, whatever the creature was, I would surprise it. Surprise was my only serious weapon in what I knew would be a very unequal fight.

The running and screaming prisoners had receded into the distance down the passage, and I heard the new threat almost immediately. A torrent of five or six zombie Reapers rushed past the doorway. Like a pack of dogs unleashed on their prey, they howled and drooled as they closed in for the kill. Intent on catching those poor wretches running ahead of them. I wanted to help, I wanted to fight something face-to-face, something tangible. I needed to feel my blade slice and dice the enemy but my inner voice told me to stay and await my chance. The only way to win this was to cut the head off the snake. I had to be patient.

It was then that I heard the voice. The psychic assault was very intense now. The words that had been muffled before now began to make sense. I began to understand.

“Give up, you have nowhere to run, inevitable, you fall into my hands. Preordained. You are here, I can sense you. Drop your defenses or I will make the others suffer. I know you are here, you were sent to me, I will shape you. Give up.” and so it went on. The language was English, the sentiment supremely confident and the pressure on my mind unbearable. I felt lost, hopeless, helpless. If ever there was a time to pray, this was it.

Even Spec Ops get scared. Our main talent is channeling the fear into something useful, something proactive. The problem was, I had nothing. It was hopeless.

The voice jerked me out of my self-flagellation “I know you Petros Arkansas, I will save you. Let go, come out and let me see you.” The insidious voice almost got through when it mentioned my name. Inwardly I shored up my defense. Names had power. Fortunately, I had not used my real name for more than twenty years. That name was buried and almost forgotten in my role of assuming my new identity. I had embraced my new life, but I had never disclosed nor divulged my true name to anyone. These thoughts and many more kept me sufficiently distracted from the assault on my mind, until I heard the screams, as the Zombies tore into the helpless Scalar prisoners. I realized that most of those who were now bitten would themselves become Zombies, and despite that, it didn’t matter. The only

thing that mattered was the surprise I would bring to the Reaper Officer. Then their sacrifice would not be in vain. If I ended him, then the undead could go back to being properly dead.

I waited. Hardly daring to breathe. I wanted to look out the room and down the passage. Surely the officer had moved from the elevator along the passage. Surely he was just now a few meters from me. Just outside the door. Would I get a better chance? Could he really sense me? And how the fuck had he known my name?

Edging myself low down I quickly glanced around the doorway. What I saw left my mind reeling and the complexities of my predicament suddenly came apart.

What I saw, what I could see standing not five meters away from me was a human male. An old man by all appearances, with a white-trimmed beard and sparkling blue eyes. Eyes that seemed to dance with an inner blue flame. He was looking right at me and he smiled. It could have been a friendly smile from a neighbor, except for the dark malice and a slight twist of the lips, giving the impression that all his smiles were predatory, not genial and even those didn't happen often. His body was covered from his toes to his neck in a dark and vaporous cloud, shifting and obscuring his shape slightly but leaving me in no doubt that he wore a plate mail straight from the dark ages beneath it.

"Petros" he intoned ingratiatingly. Again that unpracticed smile, "No need to grovel mate. stand up now, let me have a look at ye" His Australian accent left me in no doubt that he was from Earth, but that he could see through my invisibility left me feeling completely vulnerable. A very dangerous man this bloke. I did just as he said and stood up. The butchery was still going on some way in the distance behind me, and it was just me and this arsehole. Exactly the way it was meant to be.

"You came down the pipes, right?" he said while I moved into the corridor. My blade held before me. "They told me you were quite inventive. I admit I didn't think of it until the ward on the Princesses door was broken. I thought to myself, how on Earth did you get down below me, when we hadn't even cleared the door for you yet." He chuckled and seemed completely at ease. Old he was, but his body had that black mist surrounding it, only his head and hands were clear of it. He moved like an agile panther. I would not be underestimating this man. Careful and cunning. He was dangerous. I could sense it, and every fiber of my being

was screaming at me to run.

I stepped back. He stepped forward.

“Now, now, no need to be frightened, digger, I know a lot about you, I know you are a Prodigy, not yet fully developed though, I know you are a retired Colonel from a spec ops background. I know everything about you, mate. We do our homework before we recruit someone to the “dark side.” He cackled ominously as his hands moved to create imaginary inverted commas as he said the last part and I immediately thought of a similar situation from one of George Lucas films. His fake cackle letting me know he wanted my thoughts to go in exactly that direction. I dispelled the images, not wanting any form of resonance between our thoughts. Instinctively I knew that his mind control would use that and gain a foothold somehow. That was when his hand flicked out and a dark shadow flew at the speed of thought. Ready for any such flicker I stepped back and away, it missed bare inches from me, but as it passed, I could feel the psychic assault quadruple and then recede as it passed.

“Very good, very good, you are a natural,” he stated. He was a talker and the longer he talked, the more I was learning. I stepped back again, and he stepped forward.

“Do you want to know why I have been waiting for you?” I wanted to know, but I would not say anything. Keep talking dickhead I thought. I guarded my eyes and stepped back again. This wasn’t a winning strategy, but I had a plan. It wasn’t a great plan as far as plans went. I couldn’t look back, but if I kept stepping back, I would soon reach the room where I had killed the brave Scalar who had been butchered by these bastards. I just needed to make it to there. It was a once off plan as far as plans go. A dead end for all of us, but a worthy plan.

“The Real Ancients trained me you know, not those sniveling cowards who lead them today, but their real leaders, they made me who I am. I have been with them for more than thirty years now. Ah, I see I surprise you. Yes, yes, your face betrays you. Your good buddy Mala was surprised too. It didn’t take me long to get him to join our cause. It’s amazing the power, Petros. Do you think that those Ancients you call Absinthe are unknown to us? They survive on our whim. We let them carry on, we let them find gifts like you, and then we let them bring you to us. An untrained Prodigy, that’s

gold to us mate. You are golden. We had to make doubly sure about you Petros. We had to make sure we got you here. Hence the Princess.”

I shot a lesser lightning bolt at him. The shot hit him squarely in the chest and I saw his face contort in mock fear and then that wicked grin spread across his face. The black shadows seemed to swallow the lightning as if it were but a single ember from a dying flame. The wrinkles crinkled near his sharp observant eyes and he began to laugh a haughty, pompous laugh. Mocking me at every step. It was working too. I was getting angry. But I had to let him keep talking. I had to let him come closer.

“The Elven King was more than ready to trade you for his daughter. We needed some insurance, you understand mate?” His smile as he wiggled his left hand made me tremble with fury. This fucker was responsible for everything. He had cut her hand off to keep her from escaping. The threat of feeding her hand to one of his pets must have been enough to send the king into a state of compliance.

These bastards were pulling strings from the beginning. *Who was this arsehole? How did he fit into the grand scheme of things? He wasn't the only Reaper Officer, so that meant there was a network of these... these necromancers? I didn't know what else to call him. He wanted me to become one of them? Fat chance. I ached to match blades with him. To pummel him with my fists, to feel his face contort around my squeezing hands, anything to wipe the smugness out of him.* Instead, I took another calculated step back. Closer to the room with explosives. Closer to the end. I wondered offhandedly if there was an afterlife, and fervently hoped there was a hell, and that was exactly where I wanted to send this mocking, sneering coward who preyed on innocents. I had to calm myself. My rage was too hot.

Internally, my world was crashing around me. The Absinthe had informants or had been compromised. I was to be the one taken here he had said, and even more clearly the Elf King had betrayed me to get his daughter back. Had Horatio known? No, I quickly reasoned, he couldn't have, not with his warning letter, although that too could have been an elaborate ruse. What would I do for a family if I had a family? My family was the Corp. What hadn't I done for them? Could I fault the king for selling me out, a barely known human for his daughter's life? I had known

all along this was a trap though. I had just not known how deep the rabbit hole went.

As if sensing my thoughts were about my brothers-in-arms the man continued to mock me, “Where is your team, Petros? Did they come down with you? No, they left you to do all the dirty work. That’s not teamwork. That’s slavery. but don’t you worry, I will set you free Petros.”

That was good, he didn’t know Raúl had been helping me. His cajoling Aussie accent was really annoying me and the familiar way he used my adopted name was infuriating, I wanted to chop him to tiny little pieces the way he had chopped these poor innocent folk. My rage was cool now. Dangerously cool. Way, way beyond the heat of rash decisions that springs from passionate anger. He would set me free? It would be me setting everyone free. One electric bolt to that pillar was all that I needed. A one-way ticket to oblivion. I just had to get him closer to the room. To be doubly sure he vaporized along with everything else down here in this cesspit.

He had conjured a blade. It was a dull rapier. Sleek and slim with a deadly sharpness. His experimental warmup slashes and swings the hallmark of a master swordsman.

One more step back.

I needed to survive this first clash. I just had to time it right. I had to keep to the plan. I stepped forward as if to engage and then shuffled two steps back. Indecisive.

He was fast, way faster than any human had any right to be. But then, he was human after all, and I had been honing my skills on Orcs. Stronger and faster than any human. He was faster than them too though, and his sword was light and quicksilver in the gloom of that narrow passageway. I parried his thrust and countered with my own. I was fast too. Faster than he expected. All my rage and fury bottled and strained was unleashed in that thrust. My Katana swift like darkness that flees from the light. Even so, he flicked his sword back to rake me along the arm, forcing my own strike just wide of his head. I felt a touch though, and just like that we were both blooded.

His smile gone, I saw anger in his eyes. He stepped back and dabbed at where his ear had been. The blood seeping from his now asymmetrical features. The ear glistened wetly on the floor. My exultance at the superficial strike was short-lived as my own wound began to throb. His blade had sliced me from elbow to wrist on my left arm. A shallow cut I

hoped, but the pain was intense and the blood trickled thickly to my hands holding my sword, making it bloody and slippery. I just had to coax him closer. Not long now. I stepped back, giving more ground.

“You have quite some sword skill, I’ll give you that.” he crooned, disguising his pain. “You will need it in the days to come. You will learn to use that skill on your mates.” The expression in his eyes held no mirth, only a promise of retribution. I guessed he needed me alive or we would not be having this dance. I’m sure he could judge as well as I that we were well matched and the sword fight would not be a certain outcome.

Before he could try anymore of his bullshit psychobabble, I unleashed the full fury of my newly acquired tricks. I sent Fireflare to dazzle him, then a toasty Fireball to follow, I laced it with dark magic, just as Shaman Bab had taught me, I sent lighting and lesser lightning and I even tried “Light the way!”. I did all of this pouring my mana into it. I had recovered enough reserves to at least put up a good show. I was also careful to keep a full 5% mana for my coup de grâce. I wanted to make him roast and if I couldn’t do that, then at least make him mad enough to follow me to oblivion.

When the dust settled, and the smoke cleared. I saw that I had achieved only the second part. His damn magical suit of armor just seemed to swallow up all the magical fury I had sent at him. Its dark vaporous clouds swirled agitated like a swarm of bees all around him. Seeming to grow in stature in accordance with my focussed magical blasts, absorbing them all. His sword was gone, back to his inventory, and I could see playtime was up.

It was time to move. He would follow me, that was for sure. I turned and ran for the sixth door where I knew the explosives were. I could just make out that very doorway around the curve of the passage. He was hot on my heels, running hard and all pretence at levity or joviality were nowhere to be seen on that angry contorted face. Funny how I could always piss people off. It must be a talent.

A few running steps away from the door, I focussed inwardly; I needed to time this right and make sure he was with me in the room. A fine way to go out in a blaze of glory. Sure, it wasn’t ideal, but I had made peace with it, and besides, I would take the bastard with me.

I reached the doorway, looked back to see he was barely meters away. I saw his frown just before he took the next step forward though.

His nose crinkled as if smelling something odd, something besides the odor of dead flesh and corruption permeating from the open doorway,

perhaps the smell of what I had been carrying in my backpack and which was now packed around the central column in the centre of that room. I smiled and extended my hand, the spell already on my lips when it hit me.

It hit me and threw me against the opposite wall. I was so blindsided it took more than a few seconds for me to realize what had happened.



# CHAPTER 36

## WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

A Reaper! A Reaper was in the room. No, two of them. Well, one was a fully fledged Reaper, he was the one who had hit me. The other was a Reaper in the making. A Scalar prisoner had hidden here in this very room and been caught, and eaten, at least partly and she was now in the process of changing into one of them.

No! it can't end like this. Please, no! I was crumpled against the passage wall. Sliding down as my legs lost the ability to carry me. The hit was so unexpected, so powerful, it had knocked me clean across from the doorway to the opposite wall. My feet had even left the floor.

Broken ribs for sure, sharp pains in my chest. I must have also hit my head; my thoughts were all over the place. Get up, shoot the lightning. Do something. I urged myself onwards.

It was all too little, too late. I had not factored in the Zombies. Smart arse! I thought to myself. Never ever forget the zombies. Sighing as I tried to regain my breath. I turned my head, the fight gone completely out of me.

The necromancer was upon me. His one-eared head hovered inches from mine. His mocking infuriating grin plastered on his blood-streaked face. My Katana had sliced him good. Small victories, I thought as I strained to get my hand up. I needed to set off the charge. Now if only I could just get my thoughts focussed, I could shoot the....

He broke my arm then. Right above my wrist. The snap of it loud in my ears. The agony, just another in the long list of pains wracking my body. The zombie shoulder charge had been the perfect sucker punch. I was so focused on one enemy when instead I should have focussed on all of them. I was beyond pain though. Dazed, my head ringing, my one arm sliced, my other now bent at an impossible angle. I didn't have the ability to cast a spell. My world was crashing down. I had lost. I had lost so completely I didn't even know which way was up. My eyes rolled back, and I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry with anguish and fury. I wanted so much and it seemed that the Universe had conspired to deny me. I... blacked out.

Unfortunately, Techno-necro guy didn't like me sleeping on his time. He slapped me to consciousness and then forced something into my mouth. I coughed, coughed some more, and then swallowed. It was a healing potion and I could feel it working on me, each ailment, each injury filled with power and realigning to perform a miraculous heal.

*The thing about this particular healing potion was it healed you by accelerating the healing process. Charlie had mentioned to me about the different healing potions. Some healed you by taking over and performing the heal for your body magically. These were the best healing potions, with the least painful side effects. Unfortunately, this healing potion was not one of those. It was one that used your own body reserves to heal you, speeding up the healing and similarly concentrating the pain quotient. While the first type of potion took moments, sometimes seconds, definitely no more than a minute for the worst wounds, this one would take minutes and possibly hours.* I screamed.

I screamed and screamed until I was hoarse. Then before I blacked out, Necro dude spoke. "No, no, no, mate, can't have you napping while there's work to be done. Stay with me. I want you to see this." He reached out for my arm, the right one, the one he had just broken and he pulled it straight. The bones had been in the process to realign anyway, so who was I to complain? I complained though. Too hoarse to scream I just gurgled a throaty raw rasp. How much could my body take? I thought to myself. Surely not much more. Just let me die already.

Then very deliberately, once he had set the bones in my forearm he pulled out a knife. I watched in morbid fascination. I knew what it was for. It was probably the very same one used on Mala. The one used to slice off his pinkie finger. I gritted my teeth. No more. I would not give this man... this thing that looked like a man the satisfaction. Sharp pains wracked me inside my chest as the bones began to realign. This potion was worse than torture. I think I preferred the injuries.

Before I could react, before I could even put up a struggle, or even reach over with my other hand. He held the hand down on the floor and severed my pinkie finger at the second knuckle. It was done so quickly and businesslike that I had trouble comprehending what had just happened.

With the healing potion I had just taken, the stump hardly bled at all. The pain was absolute and all encompassing.

When I realized why he had my finger, I lost all hope. God no! He had me in the palm of his hand. I had no choice but to comply with his every wish or he would feed me to one of his zombies. I looked across to see the struggling, changing Scalar woman, a woman who had taken refuge in that room only to be changed to that which she feared. The transition possibly the most evil and twisted thing I had ever seen. Ironically, she lay next to the head of the Scalar I had beheaded earlier. I had ending his suffering. His lifeless eyes baring witness to my shame. *Who would end my suffering?* I thought ruefully.

*I was broken inside now. Because if they asked me to turn on my comrades, I would not do it. I could never betray them. It wasn't in me. Even to save myself, I would not do it. Somehow I had to kill myself. I needed some way to set off those explosives.*

*Wait a minute, I was free, why not just blast them now?* Despite the agony coursing through me, the severed finger, the fast healing fractures and concussion with their concentrated pain, I sought a place inside me, a place I could nurture some semblance of calm to conjure this last magical miracle. This was my moment. I couldn't help but feel a surge of hope, of retribution, of rightness with the world as it seemed that time almost slowed in anticipation.

Awkwardly, my chin pressed against something. *Wait what? I had a collar on. When had that....?* My thoughts trailed off as I remembered that the Princess had also had a collar on.

I looked up to my foe's triumphant eyes and realized he had watched each and every nuance and expression on my face and was savoring every victory as I was blocked at every turn. This was a magical shackle he had put on me when I was stunned. I wouldn't be able to cast so much as a fart without his say so.

I was so crushed by my circumstances I barely heard when he passed my severed finger to his zombie slave and directed him to place it in the freezer. *I barely heard, but with an intelligence as wired as mine was, with the euphoria of pain diminishing, I heard it, and inside.... I smiled.*

"What is your name? Wait, let me guess... Bruce?" I croaked, because what else do you call a bad mannered Australian who had betrayed humankind? I certainly wasn't calling him Mick. Mick was a good Aussie

name. I especially liked Mick Dundee. He was a good ‘bloke’. Nothing like this prick.

Bruce turned back to me, his minion shuffling off to do his bidding. The freezer was six doors away. I didn’t have much time.

“What’s that digger? You want to talk to me now at last?” I saw his puzzled expression as he noticed I was no longer acting like a beaten dog. “Are you sure you want to get on my bad side? You’ve already pissed in my beer.”

“WHAT’S YOUR NAME!” I growled as loudly as I could.

“Well shit! You are a tough one, no doubt. Look mate, this is just business right. You have to do what I say or I’m gonna turn you into one of them...” He indicated the lady who was busy turning slowly, in absolute agony into a zombie.

“You can’t use magic now. Only I can take the collar off of you. No matter which way you look at it, you’re fucked. So I suggest, and it’s just a suggestion mind you, I suggest you treat ME...” He thrust his chest out at me and jabbed his thumb pointing at himself, then thrust his finger towards me, “with a little RESPECT!” His voice rose to a shout at the end. It would have been intimidating, maybe, if I hadn’t focused on his zombie. The one who had just walked down the passageway and into the storeroom with the freezers. *Wait for it.... wait for it.*

BOOM!

The thing about explosions, and especially loud and unexpected ones, is they always stun. The closer you are to one, the longer the stun. With regular training, the effects can be overcome. You should never underestimate the shock and awe value of an explosive device.

It had been a while since I had worked using stun grenades back on Earth, but the basics remained the same. Open your mouth to equalize the pressure inside your head and scrunch your eyes to prevent the flash from blinding you. Second nature to a vet like me.

This Bruce asshole had probably never met a stun grenade in his life. An explosion though, like the one I had set on the freezer, using two grenade size charges, was a whole few orders of magnitude worse than a stun grenade.

His eyes glazed over as the concussion and searing heat washed over us, reverberated past us, and on down the corridor. Plumes of debris and dust

soon followed. His eyes widened and his expression turned confused. I didn't care too much about that.

I lunged off the ground and slammed Bruce against the wall, then as he fell onto his hands and knees, I kicked him in the head.

The plate mail armor absorbed my initial attack, so he wasn't hurt as I hurtled him like-for-like, sucker-punch for sucker-punch into the wall, but when I kicked his head, he was well and truly KTFO, head lolling, blood gushing from his lips. The ear hole where I had severed his ear was bleeding freely.

My second kick was thwarted though, the magic of the plate mail seemed to push the darkness to intercept my kick and I only caught him a glancing blow. He was out cold at least. For how long, I wasn't sure. I wanted to make sure this cretin died and as I lowered to grab his hair and wrench his head back to break his neck; I saw another one of his Zombies racing to the scene. Shit! No magic, and no way to take this damn collar off without killing Bruce first. I also wasn't sure what his magic armor would do to me if I grabbed him.

The zombie was behaving differently though. Erratic. It wasn't here to protect its master. No, it was just a zombie now. The controller was unconscious. I had a chance. As long as I didn't have the rest of them to contend with.

Stooping down I picked up my Katana from where it lay. The hilt still slick with my blood. That familiar feeling of shaking an old friend's hand. I could do this.

The healing process was still ongoing in my body, with regular twinges to testify to the process. I had most of the function back in my hands fortunately, although to hold the Katana with any real effort was not comforting to say the least. His breaking my arm must have caused nerve damage because I felt pins and needles all around my hand as it tried to heal.

I felt a hell of a lot better than I had two minutes before, though, and if I had to, I could take on one of these Zombies one-on-one, but I wasn't keen on doing that until I healed more. I just had to be quick. The last thing I wanted was them all swarming me. Besides, I had a plan now, and it involved getting back down to those lower levels and setting the explosives there. Bruce had done a masterful job of wrecking the two detonators that

had been lying in room six. That didn't matter though. If Raúl had done his job, I should find two pillars on the lower levels, locked and loaded, ready to be activated. One thing I knew about Raúl was that he always did his job.

The creature sniffed at me, then turned its attention to the unconscious man lying at its feet. I had stepped back and was slowly edging my way backwards towards the elevator. No sudden moves, no turning around. Slowly edging away. My Katana perfectly balanced held out before me, a barrier between us.

The zombie hissed and then tried unexpectedly to bite Bruce. The black swirling mass of the unconscious man's plate mail reached out and touched it. Like an electric shock. The zombie flinched back like a whipped dog. Hissing louder now. Shit. if it made that noise it would attract the others. I had to get out of here. I saw Bruce twitch. He was coming around. Dammit, I had no time left. I turned and ran. It was the last thing I should have done.

The zombie, with a target now, some form of running prey, shook off the shock and lunged for me. I started to run full tilt through the dust clouds towards the elevator shaft. I had to make it. Life couldn't be so cruel to bring me so close only to fail at the finish line. Could it? Ah, who was I kidding. Life had never been fair. You suck it up and move on. And move on I did.

I passed door three. Coughing and running through this passage of death, filled with plumes of dust that made this mad dash farcical. I was relying completely on blind luck, literally, as each foot landed, I prayed for it to take me just a little bit further, praying for sure-footing where there was none to be had.

# CHAPTER 37

## CRUSHING BLOW

The lights had gone off in this section of the corridor, and there was a lot of rubble strewn about. Then it happened. My luck ran out. My foot came down right on the edge of a rock, my ankle twisted and I slipped and fell.

Fuck! I just had enough time to turn around onto my back, trying desperately to scrape away, and the monster was upon me. It's four arms grappling, wrenching and tearing. The teeth never far behind. I struggled and reached out for my fallen sword. It had to be near me. Please let it be near me. My thoughts had only one absolute focus. Keep those biting teeth from me at all costs. For every arm I had, it had two, so no matter what I tried, how I maneuvered or what trick I pulled, it always had the upper hand. If I thought fighting four Orcs at once was hard on me in training, then I now learned the reason why.

More is always more. No respite, only more. It pinned my arms to the floor and without a pause, without even a moment to celebrate its triumph over me, it went straight for the throat. I barely had time to close my eyes.

The pressure of its bite was not as bad as I thought it would be. It had hit against me, hard enough to crack my head against the floor, but still, it seemed to struggle with taking hold of my neck. Then it dawned on me. *The collar. The freaking creature was biting the collar! Yes! I thought. Yes, at last! The dice were once again rolling sevens.*

Renewed hope brought strength surging through me and I doubled my legs over and placed them, one under each armpit as all four of its arms held mine splayed out to the sides. Which one of its many armpits I had placed my feet under, I had no idea. It didn't matter. there were so many to choose from. *Armpits! ha, I was the King of Armpits mutha-fucker!*

My feet firmly in place, I focussed with all my might. All my considerable strength bunched into that one, single, upside-down squat. I

could feel my head getting wrenched left and right, the zombie boring down, chewing and biting, trying to get at my throat. The pressure I exerted was going to snap my spine. I screamed in rage, my veins throbbing and popping in time to my ever increasing heart rate. I could see my stamina bar dropping rapidly. The fall like a comet and yet slowly. Ever so slowly, the collar began to tear off me, still clamped in the creature's mouth as it progressively chewed through to get at my jugular.

I thought of Feldwebel Swart then, and his insistence to always push for one more rep, "Vone more Armpit!, Always vone more!" I thanked him then, as I gave that one last mighty heave.

*There! I could feel it breaking, and at last I did it. I actually did it, without tearing my head off!*

My legs straightened, and with a rending tearing sound, the collar finally snapped. That stupid collar thing that kept my mana at bay. I felt the mana surge into me then. Pure, fresh, and heavenly cool mana filled the void inside me. The zombie spat the collar away and surged for me once again. this time I had no protection, no collar to prevent its teeth from sinking into my neck, but I did have my magic.

It was the ignition point of the sun. Flame on! I screamed, and the zombie fell away, an undead inferno. Its head and torso on fire. The flames dancing eerily in the dust riddled corridor.

The movements of air as it fed the flames gave everything around me a surreal quality. Light from its burning hide dancing like an aurora across the stratosphere. To one side the glint of metal caught my eye and after two steps I grasped my faithful companion. *It was my time to shine.*

I also saw something else in the flickering light on the floor besides my Katana. Something pale, with a splash of red. A contorted thing, like a slug that had been flattened with a heel and the imprint of the heel still contouring its flesh.

When I realized what it was, I smiled and thanked all that was good with the world. I used my Katana to impale it, like a slice of meat on a kebab, it hung limply dripping blood from the tip.

The zombie was just standing. Flames licking across its face, hair and chest. Whatever remnants of clothes it had worn were now ash. The flesh of its face burned black and a putrid stench filled the air. I could see the lips had



been burned off, only the teeth flashed white and unharmed. It was moaning gently, its eyes boiling and leaking out. I had to be quick, my magical 'Flame on' attack had been brutal. *I blamed my lack of control for the situation. Desperate times for desperate measures.*

I turned towards it and extended my blade with the misshapen white thing on the tip. No, it wasn't a marshmallow, although my thoughts did go in that direction. The pasty morsel dangled against the creature's mouth. It snapped forward. Responding to the life force that remained in the ear and it bit down breaking some of its pearly whites on my blade. I jerked the blade back, minus the part of Bruce that I hoped this Reaver could swallow.

And swallow it did, because from down the corridor I had just departed not two minutes before, an ear-shattering scream reverberated. The scream was so hollow, so raw, and so very terrified that it made me flinch. If I had an ounce of pity left, I would have cried just hearing that scream, but instead, it brought a joyous pride to my smile.

A fierce and utter triumph surged through me as I knew I had just killed Bruce in the slowest and most agonizing way possible. My only regret was that I could not hang around to witness it.

Plans change. I wanted to survive to enjoy this victory. I left the smoldering Reaper to enjoy the gristly meal and left Bruce to die as he had done to so many others. *Just desserts.*

# CHAPTER 38

## THE LURE OF ESCAPE

I made for the elevator shaft, more carefully this time, and then set the elevator to go up. I stepped out before the doors closed, waited for it to ascend, and then clambered down the shaft to the bowels of the Earth once more. It wouldn't do to have Bruce get an easy exit. I didn't know if he had an antidote for his curse, but in a few minutes it would matter not. This place was coming down!

The explosives were neatly packed at the base of both pillars. The det's, like fresh cigars lying next to them. I set the timer in the first batch of explosives to 99, and at the second pillar I set the det to 90. I now had 90 seconds to get the heck out of Dodge. It would be a shame not to make it. I started to run. The last time I had traversed these halls, it had taken us 20 minutes. This time I had a minute and change. Time to haul ass!

I kept the count in my head as best I could. It was reaching 20 seconds, and I hadn't reached the refuse pit yet. It was just around the corner and I could feel the ominous weight of rock and earth above me. When those explosives blew, it was all going to all come tumbling down. I was right beneath it. It couldn't end like this, I had to run faster.

I approached the last bend when I realized that I actually would not make it to the ventilation shaft exit. After everything I had been through, how could I not survive? Please God give me strength. I have to get there. After being ready to give up everything, to throw my life in the way of these Reapers to destroy a monstrosity, then being given this lifeline only to have it snatched away again? It was too much to contemplate. I ran even faster. While running, I summoned my Katana. This epic gift from the Elves. If I had a chance, it would be miraculous. What is magic, if not miraculous?

The count reached zero, and the ground buckled and I went sprawling. Sound travels through solids much more quickly than in air, but the force and concussion wave which hit me were even faster than that. It was barely a moment later when my scream of desperation was drowned out by a

massive and all-pervasive explosion, that lifted me from my feet and propelled me even further into the last and lowest room of the catacombs, along with all the rot, sewage and decomposing refuse. Add in a couple thousand tonnes of rocks and I was in the oil-making business. Nope, I wanted to survive! I had to survive.

I focussed all my will into creating a protective barrier around my being and I tapped deep into my mana reserves, depleted as they were. My anger and sense of betrayal at how unfair the world was, honed my mind needle sharp. I tapped deeper still and even deeper than that. I felt something tear deep inside me. Time slowed as a flood of cool precious mana poured into me, as the massive reserves of mana stored in my gifted artifact emptied into me. I opened my heart and mind to them and they flowed and flowed, in, and around me, and they surrounded me, as I shaped the elemental magic draining from the gems within my epic item.

I conjured fire and then ice; I conjured fury and anger and let all my emotions flow; it was hysteria and mania; it was a pure unrelenting joy and psychotic abandon, and then when the fuel and the fury spent, and I had nothing left to give it was all gone.

Empty.

There was a wash of sizzling heat, the crash of stupendous sound and the thud and crush of unbearable pressure, and then as my vision went red, darkest black descended, and I knew no more.

*The last sounds that entered my mind were by an unwelcome voice which said, "You are dying!". I smiled at this and added my own inner voice, just two words, but if I was dying, it would be me who gets the last word, not some AI.*

The thoughts tinged with pride carried me onward, "*Mission accomplished!*".

I awoke to the sound of tapping. It was an annoying sound. Tap, tap tap. Consistent and all-encompassing. It was pitch black and cloying around me and when I tried to move, almost every nerve screamed for me to be still. I listened to them. Panting at the effort, I moved my head to the source of the

tapping and felt the cool wetness of moisture dripping onto my head. I fell unconscious again.

A while later I awoke. The tapping now a constant drip onto my head a kind of morse code that had no pause, no dash or dot, but the message it wrote into the universe and into my mind was that I was alive. Barely. But even a spark is more than I had expected. How much time had passed I had no idea. The moisture had gathered in my hair and was sliding around my face, off my chin as gravity pulled the moisture ever deeper to the earth below me. It took a while for my thoughts to gather. For my mind to piece together what kind of predicament I was in. Alone, in the dark, stuck in a collapsed cavern, many floors below the ground. What to do and how to do it? I was a man of action.

I had nothing to gain but my death if I lay here and accepted my fate. Also, my brothers were in danger. Had Raúl made it out with the Princess? How would Mala behave when he found he was back with the Absinthe. I also had a score to settle with the Elvish King.

Lastly, and most importantly. Had the explosives set against the support beam collapsed the entire complex or just the area I was in. With these thoughts, I began to move and assess my injuries. I also looked at my battle log.

I found to my amazement that not only did the battle log record my kills from the explosives upstairs; but it also awarded me bonus points for ingenuity, creativity, and improvisation. The message I had achieved the main objectives was a relief, but also disconcerting as I wondered how it could know if the Princess had made it out safely. I scanned past the “You have leveled up!” messages and found to my amazement that I was now level 45. I had a lot of skill points to distribute too but those could wait for later when I had a more clear understanding of where I was and what I needed to do. The screen began to flash as I narrowed in on important parts of my mission.

“You have destroyed a Reaper Officer. The experience gained from this encounter pales compared to the information you have obtained. What will

you do now?"

It was a poignant question and required me to look at my health status.

"You have died, the explosion ripped apart the entire Scalar scientific complex and thousands of tons of rock and concrete have collapsed into the void you now inhabit. Because of your ability to stare into the abyss and laugh at adversity, your body could regenerate 400 hp after the dust had settled upon your dead and twitching corpse. Your timely application of the mana shield consuming your epic item of mana storage; the Staff of Illuminous, and with amazing amounts of luck that no-one should leave home without, has left you within a hollowed out area. The heat you generated melted the surrounding crushing rock to form an obsidian cocoon around you. The application of ice and cooling while residing in your personal force shield, despite being untrained, were impressive feats of magic that even the Aevish races would marvel at. Subconsciously you could thwart not only the scalding fires of hell created by your own inauspicious use of a flame shield, your subsequent use of the ice shield created plumes of scalding steam which were equally deadly and somehow, while barely conscious, you buffered them and directed them away from your person. Sadly, the Aevish races will never know about these glorious feats, and you may never escape from this place. Unless... you do something about it!"

Since when had my internal battle log become so acerbic? It seemed to be mocking me. It did tell me that I had somehow managed to create a haven of relative safety though. If it wasn't for all that stored mana within the Katana I would be as flat as a pancake. Epic item it was. Unfortunately, I had destroyed it in the process and consumed 25000 mana points as it flowed through me and looking at my health bar. I was on less than 10%. It hadn't moved up since I awoke and meant I had very serious injuries. Besides a massive concussion, I most likely had broken bones, internal injuries, and probably a few burns judging by the pain. That my spine was intact was apparent because I could feel my right foot and leg up to the hip joint screaming in agony whenever I tried to move. My ribs hurt when I breathed, but besides the sharp pain, there was no wetness or sucking feeling coming from my lungs. First, I needed light.

I spelled Illuminate and found I was cocooned within a dark obsidian structure, roughly egg-shaped, there were a few cracks in places that accounted for the air and dust. If I could get out of this, it would definitely be like a kind of rebirth or more appropriately hatching. The entire floor of the egg-shape was filled with a mixture of water and blood and a few other bodily fluids and it stank in here. I was naked and had scratches and bruises throughout. My skin was wrinkled and almost seemed to be sloughing off in places where my feet were submerged. The dark purple and greenish hue of the bruises along my legs and torso gave me an indication that I had been down here a few days already.

My belly responded to that thought with a growl and I remembered my ring of holding. With a thought I brought forth some rations, a healing potion, and I looked at what remained of my Katana. It was only the blade, as the handle was completely gone. As if it never existed and try as I might I could not get it to change to staff or knife as I had in the past. It was well and truly broken. The metal of the blade had a peculiar sheen to it I had not noticed before and the layers of pressed metal that had given the Katana its strength, suppleness and unique beauty were not apparent. It was as if the magical flow that must have permeated the entire artifact had melded them all together making the metal folds blend into one solid structure. From what I knew about the making of the Katana, this meant it could no longer withstand the rigors of battle and would snap at the first opportunity. I kept it, however, a small nagging voice telling me that perhaps all was not lost, and it could be restored in some fashion at some later date.

The healing potion rippled through my body and mended everything. The pain was a small thing as the pain was my friend and meant I was alive. I would have to thank Charlie profusely when I saw him again. His healing potion was definitely a pick me up and did I detect a taste of bourbon in there? I still had one more healing potion and would keep that for the next time I was stupid.

Damn heroic gestures were definitely not good for my health and all would be for naught if I didn't get back into the world and make some very surprised people pay for their betrayal. I had proved these bastard Reapers could be dealt with. The fact that they were human though made me pause

in my pondering. A human techno-necro was definitely a scary proposition. His psychic assault had nearly made me succumb to his will, and I wasn't sure what his murky armor would have done to my sword, but most likely it wasn't good. The longer I had faced him, had resisted his psychic battery, the more resistant I had become to his wiles. I suspected I had my recent upgrades to thank for that, and many years of butting my head against walls in the military.

So much had happened so quickly and yet I was no closer to achieving anything. Least of all getting out of this predicament. Would anyone come for me? The US Armed forces never left a man behind, but the mess I had caused would leave anyone interested in retrieving me doubtful of anything to retrieve. Besides, ASS was anything but the US Armed forces. How long could I survive stuck in an egg below the Earth? Foremost I needed to get out.

# CHAPTER 39

## WINDING DOWN

It took me three solid days. Each day I burrowed using my strength, my bare hands, and my pitiful magic to displace rock, sand, and concrete. The first part had been easy, the obsidian egg that I emerged from, I chipped away with short bursts of mana powered effort to give me access to what had become of the original corridor.

Some parts of it were still standing, but most other parts were completely caved in. I was able to move rocks, and debris around me into gaps I either created or found until I met large solid sections of the strata that I had no way of moving physically or magically. I tried to go around those. Part of my newly acquired skill levels had come from putting points into mining and refining ore, both skills I had no idea about, nor practical experience with until they showed up on my inventory of skills list.

Just by adding points to them gave me an inner understanding of rocks, construction and the harvesting of ore, at a level I had never understood. I found myself pondering geological formations, crystalline structures, and the composition of rocks as never before.

Where the information came from I could only guess, but it seemed that the quantum computer that was developing in my head, or wherever it was located had an endless library of information that could be fed to me, provided I showed the inclination to search for it and attribute myself the skills for it. The more I partook in that particular skill, the more information was released to my conscious mind and the more easily I could deduce ways to manipulate and mine the earth around me.

The additional skill points I acquired over the course of the three days, I attributed to Earth and Metal magic that gave me access to short term earth moving spells. My constant use of them left me drained and exhausted, but after each instance, I could displace more and more rock, shore up the tunnel and support unstable structures.



After which I would crawl back to my cracked egg cocoon and using a gourd, collected some filthy water within. Then my Cleanse spell would clean the water of impurities and I drank until my belly bulged.

Food rations were in short supply, but with careful rationing, I made them last the full three days. I was extremely grumpy at first, the confined space I found myself in making me feel claustrophobic at times.

The constant threat of crushing rock from above was also nagging at me somewhere deep inside and I had to wrestle with my fears as if they were alive and smothering me in the dark.

I became lethargically quiescent at the latter stages of my ordeal as food ran out and the hopelessness of my situation compounded down around me. When I came across the air duct pipe, it was a veritable lifeline, and I was able to dig with a lot more fervor until I found the manhole entrance whereupon using the last of my waning strength I climbed up it and out to freedom.

Along the way, I had missed the access point at ground level and continued until I reached the extraction fan at the top of the surrounding cliff. It continued to turn, still powered and attached to some form of solar panel array that must have powered the entire complex. I finally clambered out to lie upon a grating far up the side of the cliff with a birds-eye-view of the destruction the explosives had wrought.

Below in the cul-de-sac, where before, an elegant if somewhat stark scientific building had been, now, lay a fractured ruin.

Almost the entire building had collapsed, and not just collapsed, but had fallen into the cavern system below. The only parts standing were at the very edge of the original L shaped building. I say standing liberally because the stark struts of concrete pillars were bent ominously like drunken men trying to hold each other up and the connected walls were barely hanging by threads.

Along the side of the cliffs at places, there had been large rockfalls, which had all done their fair share of filling in the crater where the building had once stood.

I marveled at the destruction sown by the Scalar explosives. That I had made my way out of that mess was a miracle and I felt providence smiling down on me. I didn't know which God or God's to thank in this world, but I figured, any or all, it didn't matter. I owed them one indeed.

Upon the cliff face leading higher, I found a ladder that went right to the top. I used it to get clear of the place and without looking back made my way around along the cliff edge and then South towards the access road which I surmised should lead to some type of civilization. I knew that I had missed the waypoint deadline to teleport back to the Absinthe ship many days ago, and I wasn't even sure I wanted to go back there. I had decided in those dark caverns below that I needed to get to Illuminous. That is where I would find answers and that is where I could lay some smack down for my situation. First, I had to find Shavestri and recruit him to my cause.

I set off at a brisk walk down the mountainside. I was a man of action and I had a new mission.



# END OF BOOK 1

## ABDUCTION CHRONICLES: ARENA



*“If only the lights were signs of salvation instead of destruction.”*

# CHAPTER 1

## DESOLATION

I stood looking out over a vast expanse of an Alien landscape. The city below was under attack. There were drop ships coming in, dropping off the zombie-like Reaper troops. They swarmed out and towards the city in massive groups of undead flesh. The drop ship would then elevate and hover above the battlefield. The necromancer controller had to be in the ship, guiding the platoons of Reapers to stream forth like the bursting of a festering boil into the beleaguered city. I could see there was still resistance from the living.

Explosive bolts of fire, black swirls of shadow and sizzling streams of lightning issued forth from various places along the surrounding walls into the attacking undead, but they sadly made hardly a dent and already in several places the Reapers swarmed over the walls, compromising the barrier with hardly a stall in their progress.

As I watched, the defending magical blasts lessened, and the fight began to move to within the city. Flashes of light from between the buildings and explosions slowed the zombie advance. As the Reapers consumed their enemy, the dead and dying became part of the Reaper army. It was a terrible tragedy. Most of those people being killed and consumed were everyday Scalar. A race who had been fighting these Reapers for over a hundred years. The four armed, three-eyed people were strong physically and yet could not fight this kind of onslaught.

The Reapers had been holding back before. They made the city burn within half a day and literally doubled their fighting force in the process. It was little wonder that the Absinthe who had recruited me were afraid of this foe.

The twelve drop-ships hovering above the city were under no threat as they guided their minions wreaking havoc below. It was truly an unfair fight, and it left me feeling bereft.

It had taken me five days to get here from my temporary grave back in a science facility. A place I had killed a Reaper Officer with a great deal of luck, and in the process had destroyed the research facility. Buried underground, protected only by an epic item I had been gifted. The pure force of activating my protection shield had opened my magical ways to enable me to use up to Tier 8 magic. The explosion had killed me outright, but because of an upgrade feature that allowed nanobots within my body to restore my life even after death had rendered my internal organs useless, I could revive. The restoration was within certain limits, so, fortunately, my death had not been the kind where my body was vaporized, although the shock wave produced by the explosives had made a lot of my body useless. These nanobots, powered from tachyon space could restore me to a living condition once the carnage of the explosion and subsequent collapse of the complex had settled. Somehow they had prevented my spirit from leaving and I had awakened to pain, confusion, and abilities I could never have dreamed of just two months previous. How things had changed.

It all started when I had been abducted from Earth and conscripted into the Absinthe's secret military force. A new recruit of Earth Special Forces operatives, I had been introduced to nanotech and magic. Thanks to the exceptional abilities I had built up over a career of 30 years in various armed forces. They had discovered I was one of a select few who had Prodigy abilities. I had used the upgrades in ways that others could not. And now, before me lay the ruins of the nearest city on an alien planet. A place I was heading to, to find refuge from the Reaper scourge. There would be no refuge here.

This attack was most likely a response from the Reapers as punishment for killing one of their Necromancers. It was a grim thought and the Grim Reaper himself was having his fill.

I was responsible for this, and as these thoughts settled on me; I felt a complete sense of helplessness. I had so many plans, so many thoughts on how to confront the Elf King for his betrayal, how to narrow down on the

traitor within the Absinthe ship, and they all lay like pearls before swine as the undead army streamed into this soon to be ruin of a city.

Time past and the undead reaped all life from that strange and idealic city. Medieval in its appearance, with hints of advancement in architecture and technology. The spires and curves of taller buildings combining with the shabby shacks of the less wealthy, all blurry in the distance. All these accouterments of the living were useless now. They held no refuge, no place to hide. The Reapers had come to town and they were reaping.

The hopes and dreams of all those people lay in the dust where the dead became undead and the drop-ships swooped in and collected their now augmented ranks. I turned away, Despair filling my heart as I wondered what I could do, when I felt it. It was the barest tremble.

The ground was shaking. A slight unbalancing, then the shuddering as during an earthquake. That woozy feeling as the ground beneath your feet betrayed you. I turned back to look at the city from my vantage point overlooking the entire scene and from within the center of the city, a large column began to rise. It appeared to be an obelisk and it parted the earth as it rose, throwing buildings aside. Plumes of dust and debris the only witness while it inexorably stretched out of the earth towards the sky in what appeared to be a last ditch effort of pleading to the God's for salvation. On its pinnacle was a radiant pulsating light. The light was growing in intensity and the drop-ships above the city began to retreat. The ones on the ground, open and receiving the streams of zombie passengers lit their respective thrusters and tried to take off. But by then it was far, far too late. The radiant light, ever brighter and almost painful to look at, sent out a spherical blast of energy. The pulse a veritable wave of searing destruction.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen, and it sped out in a massive ever-expanding sphere. I saw the ships closest, poised like vultures in the sky lose all power. Like falling rotting fruit. They simply fell from the sky, crashing and exploding as they met the unforgiving earth. The impacts the result of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. The long lines of Reaper troops streaming out of the city all fell where they stood. Their undead animation ended. The strings of the puppet masters cut so suddenly and so soundly that the world seemed to be holding its breath.

I stood in amazement, watching this all play out. Of the twelve Reaper drop-ships, only one had escaped the blast radius and it accelerated away and up as fast as it could go. Was it an EMP blast? I didn't know, but I could see the blast force crashing like a ripple across the landscape. Heading out in every direction as it ate up the kilometers in an ever-expanding sphere. It was heading towards me. What should I do? I had no idea what it was. Did it affect only the undead?

The ground rippled as it drew nearer. Buckling the ground before it, and spreading ever closer. Trees, shrubs, dust and stone all engulfed and pushed flat and away. The kilometers of distance being swallowed up in a consistent and outward-bound force. The shock wave spread ever outward, ever closer to my position. There was no way I could evade it. No way I could escape.

Accepting the inevitability of the onrushing doom in my mind, I created a force field around me and braced myself against a rock, hoping beyond hope that it would have some ability to protect me. I didn't have huge reserves of mana power to tap into, not like I had in the caves before. I only had what was within me. It would have to do. I steeled my will and braced for impact. After all that I had been through, this would be a shitty way to die.

I was just an observer, just passing by. Excuse me, Don't mind me. I'm not even from here.

None of that mattered.

It arrived like an avenging angel and it swallowed my world in bright and all-pervading light, and then it seemed to rip me asunder and my Mana bar drained so completely and so suddenly that I might as well have never had one. My vision blurred, and I fell unconscious, dark ominous red lights blinking abstractly behind my fluttering lids as they seemed to close for the last time once more.

\*To continue enjoying Petros Arkansas adventures, the next book: Abduction Chronicles: Arena will be available soon.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter John was born in Rhodesia, a country that doesn't exist anymore. He grew up in South Africa, during a time of turmoil and strife and learned many valuable lessons which shaped his inquisitive fertile mind.

After National Service and a degree in Zoology, he spent a decade working in Animal Health, and Veterinary Services.

Currently living in the Far East he tutors English and pursues a passion for wildlife photography and writing.

His other hobbies include chilling with his cats, playing online games and exploring the natural heritage of Earth before it is all gone.

Advice to all prospective Authors and Writers is to embrace the Goddess "Nike".

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